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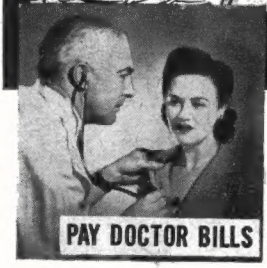

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THE STRAWBOSS

GREETINGS, compadres. You know, some folks might tell you the great figures of the Old West are all dead. Well, they'd be wrong. Sure, it's many years now since Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid went to their final resting places, but arguments about the lives they lived are still raging.

Was Jesse James a loot-hungry outlaw —or a latter-day Robin Hood who "stole from the rich and gave to the poor"? Was Pat Garrett a fearless sheriff—or a cowardly bushwhacker? There are those who insist Colonel Chivington was only doing his duty, the day he massacred hundreds of Cheyenne men, women and children at Sand Creek.

Others claim he was directly responsible for the Indian Wars that plagued the West in the '70's and '80's.

We don't aim to take sides in these controversies, but we're always ready to present a fresh viewpoint on an old yarn. Like, for example, Allan K. Echols' account of what the Indians thought of General Custer. . . .

The Plains Indians had signs for everything. The cut of the feathers in their headdress and the dress of their horses had meaning, each feather telling its story by the way it was cut and painted. His horse was decorated with feathers and paint, as the warrior was, and the designs were not the result of artistic whims, but told the history of the man and horse wearing them.

The Indians had their war history painted on them, as American soldiers wear campaign bars. They even had designs painted on themselves and their horses which showed the world what they intended to do. One of these signs, originally known as the "message from the dead," and later and more gruesomely as "The Bloody Custer," has an interesting and significant history.

The legend says that the use of the sign started a long time ago when a brave who was fatally wounded and bleeding, put his hand on his horse's hip to support himself until he toppled over dead. Then the horse ran home, and the bloody handprint on his hip told the tribe what had happened.

(Continued on page 113)

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Trouble in Truckee

What mattered most, in that brawling boomtown, Truckee, was not which side of the law you were on—but which end of a sixgun!

By JOHN T. LYNCH

HIGH up near Donner Summit the little town of Truckee, in 1869, found itself growing in wealth and importance. Gold and silver were being mined over in Virginia City, not far away, and plenty of lumber, it seemed, was needed for the purpose. And with an inexhaustible supply of evergreen and fir trees in the surrounding mountains, plus an influx of saw mills, Truckee became the main source of lumber supply.

As more and more legitimate business houses, shops, stores and restaurants opened up on Front Street, so did more saloons, gambling houses and other shady establishments open up on Jibboom Street, one block away. From the first, the upright and reputable citizens shuddered at the murderous antics of the denizens of Jibboom Street.

For a long time that was all the better element did about the situation, rapidly growing worse—just shudder. They had, at one time, hired three men to police the town. The experiment failed miserably. On their first night on duty the trio of temporary lawmen got into a drunken argument, then indulged in a terrific gun battle which blotted the police force out completely.

At a later date, shortly after three masked men had robbed the town's only bank, in broad daylight, one special officer had been appointed. But he was fired on the morning that he reported the fact that, whilst he slept the night before, some dirty crook from Jibboom Street had stolen his coat, gun and star. It was later ascertained that he had put up all three articles as security against payment for a quart of whiskey.

D. B. Frink, editor of the *Truckee Republican,* watched with horrified eyes as lawlessness of all kinds went unpunished. Killings were becoming a nightly routine affair in Truckee. Thugs wandered the dark streets and picked their victims at random. Noise of the constant brawls, fights and sporadic shootings over on Jibboom Street made sleep and rest almost impossible for the better citizens.

Frink—remembering how the Vigilance Committee over in Virginia City had given short shift and a long rope to undesirables so effectively, just a couple of years back—tried hard, several times, to interest his fellow business men in doing the same. But, on each attempt to organize a vigilance committee, Frink was given the same answer. "No," was the crux of the general response. "Things are bad, but not bad enough to warrant vigilante action. Not yet enough real provocation."

"What do you call real provocation?" asked Frink. "You goin' to wait until they burn down the town?"

This is exactly what they did.

One night in July, Louie Derr, owner of a Jibboom Street saloon, had a violent argument with his nagging wife. When she threw a knife at him, grazing his head, he decided he'd had enough. "I'm leavin' this place—and I ain't ever comin' back!"

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

After he slammed out, the lady murmured, "You sure ain't."

Then she set fire to the saloon.

THE saloon blazed brightly in the night. So did thirty other of the town's dry, wooden structures, including a number of shops, homes, other saloons, a hotel and the schoolhouse. Both Front Street and Jibboom Street were practically wiped out.

Even though the plentiful supply of lumber made it possible to rebuild the town within a short time, at last the better element were ready to listen to D. B. Frink, and his talk of a vigilance committee. They had suffered enough.

At a secret meeting of the decent element the committee was formed. Frink was named as its leader.

It was just one day following the organization meeting that Big Andy Fugate wandered over to Elmer Kress' Barber Shop, on Front Street.

"Shave me," growled Big Andy. "And if you cut me, I'll kill you."

Poor Elmer, his hands trembling, accidentally did cut the big bully from Jibboom Street. True to his word, Big Andy grabbed the razor and slit Elmer's throat.

News of Big Andy Fugate's latest murder spread rapidly through the town. D. B. Frink immediately called his vigilantes into their first action.

Dark night had enveloped Truckee by the time the committee of twenty upright citizens located the hiding place of Big Andy. It was a dimly lighted hotel, consisting of a small lobby and a long hallway, all on one floor. The guest rooms were on either side of the hallway that ran the length of the one-story old structure.

The vigilantes, all masked, descended upon the hotel. At this point, D. B. Frink felt it fitting to deliver a short pep talk to his men, all fully armed.

"Men," said Frink, "this vigilance committee is something to be proud of. In the name of dear Justice it must do its duty. We may have to kill a man, while trying to take him. So be it. Just remember—the man who goes down under the fire of this committee well deserves what he gets!"

Big Andy Fugate, who had watched the scene surreptitiously from the lobby window, took this opportunity to depart quietly by the rear door.

"Now, men," D. B. Frink ordered, "I, personally, will take along five men to guard any chance of escape by the back door. The rest of you go through the building and smoke out Big Andy."

While Frink and his squad made its way around to the rear, the main body of the vigilantes carefully edged into the lobby. Two of the braver men started slowly down the long, dark hall, opening doors as they passed. The balance of the party followed nervously, shotguns and rifles in alert readiness. Half way down the hall the two men in the lead stopped suddenly. One pointed a shaky finger toward a door at the end of the passageway. There, glinting in the dim light, could be seen the barrel of a rifle, poked through a tiny square hole in the door.

As one man, the committee members in the hallway raised their weapons and sent a withering stream of hot lead through the door.

"Somebody beat it around the back and tell Frink we got our man!" yelled one of the committee.

But the vigilante who bore the glad tidings could not tell D. B. Frink anything. He was dead. So were the five men he had taken with him to guard the rear exit. It had been Frink's rifle barrel inserted in the door's opening.

Jibboom Street, led by Big Andy Fugate, celebrated for the next three days—and nights. During the hilarious fete somebody ambushed Big Andy and blasted his life out. Although nobody knew who did it, gossip had it that Hank Lee, the town's only remaining barber, was the killer. ● ● ●

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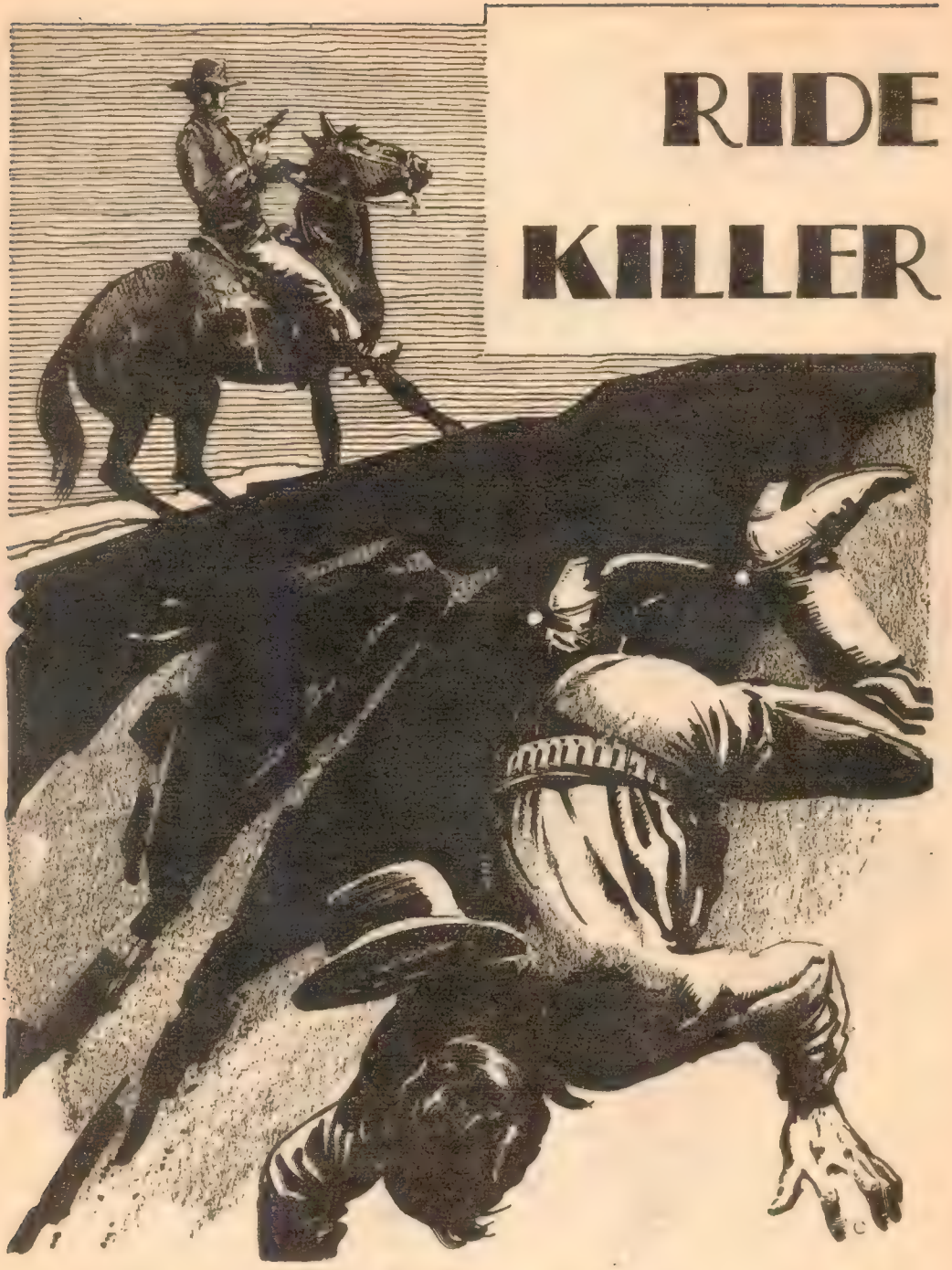
RIDE KILLER



Cortland Lacey, renegade, killer—and gentleman—had served too well the only gods he knew: his guns. But now, with the posse closing in, would he have time to do one last unselfish act, before he came to the end of his smoky, violent trail?

THE DOWN!

The marshal screamed and tried to throw himself off his horse, but the horse plunged outward over the break, taking the man with him . . .

Manhunt Saga, By

GEORGE C. APPELL

CHAPTER ONE

No Place to Go

THE town that Cort Lacey was watching was suspended like a mirage between the pale afterlight where the sun had died twenty minutes before and the mottled purple sweep of the flat country flinging its darkness to the horizons. The hard-angled silhouettes of the buildings still retained an effect of crimson from the gone sun, as if they had been

brushed with blood; and Lacey whipped his glance around over his shoulder, from habit, and studied the dusk behind him.

Killers acquire that habit, if they live long enough. Lacey would do that when you least expected it, when you were standing with him at a bar or talking to him on a street: suddenly flash his face at you, and immobilize you with a questioning stare. But he could never do it to a riding companion, because he always rode alone.

He turned his head forward now, satisfied that the deepening dusk at his back was empty. Only the town ahead troubled him, as so many towns did, because the warning word was out for him and had been out for a long time now. He didn't know exactly how long, because he didn't count the years; there were too many of them crowding his past already.

Since Virginia in '66, anyway; and since Kentucky right after that; and since Missouri and the Dakotahs somewhat later. Now he was in Oregon, and he'd heard that the word had gone as far west as the Coast, so that he felt surrounded. Consequently he had to be sure of a town before he entered it.

Poking toward this one at a walk, he conned the eaves of buildings for signs of lookouts, because that was one way of discerning an alert. He quartered right, on his north hand, and got a better view of the street. There were no groups in it, only a lone figure trudging toward a saloon. *The* saloon, Lacey noted. A one-bar town.

He halted his horse then, and straightened the black loops of his string tie and canted his hat further over his left ear. He wasn't a tall man, as they grew them, but he gave the impression of height because of his slimness. He had old eyes in a young face, a doubting mouth above a determined chin; and he was clean-shaven except for a brittle dash of black along the smooth tan of his upper lip. The hair was his head, running down to his cheekbones in clipped sideburns, was prematurely gray. He was thirty-eight years old. Thus Cortland Lacey, out of the Tidewater by way of the Missouri to the Northwest, the still-tailored remains of a gentleman for whom many men were searching.

He decided that this one-bar town was safe for him, and he entered it at a walk, looking neither to left nor to right nor behind nor ahead. He kept his eyes on his horse's twitching ears, like a man who, though trail-worn, is easy of conscience. He put his horse in Matlock's Stables and asked for oats and a rubdown, then some hay. "And you might look at his frogs and clean them if they need it. Feel his pasterns, too, and make sure they're not knotted." He flipped the boy a dollar.

HE WALKED toward the saloon, walking lightly, arms loose along the swinging flares of his coat. Watching his arms hanging that way, you got the impression that they were like weapons just loosened and riding easy and ready in the scabbards. And they were.

The saloon wasn't much, but it was clean and the man who ran it evidently took great pride in it. Lacey asked the barman if he was also the owner and the barman said yes, he was; and Lacey complimented him by not showing surprise.

There was a mongrel pup there, a yellow Indian dog, and it waddled up to Lacey with its tongue flopping wetly and its bottomless eyes dancing like bright new pennies in lamplight. Lacey, ordering bourbon, knelt to play with its ears. When he rose, a voice from the rear shadows said, "Don't be flattered, mister, dogs like anybody." And there came a titter of self-satisfaction.

Cort Lacey fixed his eyes on that back table and saw the lone man who must be the one who had recently trudged into this place. The cut of the man was lank and jointless, as if all his bones had been broken, and his long face with its horse jaws hung a little to one side, so that his shaggy

brown hair got lost in the greasy folds of his neckerchief. Lacey ignored him.

The barman swobbed a non-existent damp spot on the polished woodwork and inquired, "Passin' through?" He snapped the towel at a fly, and got it. "Or aimin' to stay awhile?"

"Haven't decided yet. Nice town."

"Yes, it is."

Lacey finished his drink and ordered another. Seldom did he do this, for he was a two-ounce-in-twenty-four-hours man. But he had seen something on the scrubbed wall beyond the bend of the bar, and it had shaken him.

Just a slight jolt, the kind he had experienced before, but nonetheless a jolt. What he had seen was a faded dodger tacked up there, requesting information about himself. It was not a new experience, seeing that dodger or others like it, but it always shook him. There was a rough description of him in small print, but it could have described one man in ten west of the Missouri River. This particular dodger was from Bismarck. Murder.

Lacey smoked, leaning on one elbow, facing away from the man who was slouched at the back table. Murder. That, of course, depended upon what you called murder.

In this case: a card game in a smoky upstairs room and Lacey abruptly demanding to know where the fifth ace was. And getting the answer in the whip-smart draw of another player's .44. And replying, himself, with a single blast from his bucking .45 and then taking the drainpipe out, with splinters of window glass cutting his coattails. But there was still a dead man lying on the floor with an unfired .44 in his hand, and Bismarck does not like that sort of thing. Not when the cause of it comes from the East, anyway. So it was murder.

Lacey had elected to escape; he might have hired a shrewd lawyer and gone to trial and fought it through the courts, but he didn't. He chose to run, because by that time he was running from most things, including himself. It wasn't a sense of guilt, but an innate distaste for the course into which he had been forced in life.

He drank half his drink and asked, "Got anything for the pup?"

"He does all right," the barman said. "We have a steak-fry here four nights a week, and he gets his."

Lacey nodded and dropped his cigarette and stepped on it carefully. He was glad that he did not notch his guns, for that is the mark of the amateur or of the braggart, an he conceived himself to be neither.

After the first time, back in Virginia, when he'd been accused of committing the murder that Brayton Blalock had committed, he had thought of notching his gun just for the hell of it. But later, after he'd escaped, after he'd shot the sheriff who was coming after him with a rope and a revolver, he decided to leave his gun uncut, because by that time he was past doing things for the hell of it, to be funny. Since then—since '66—it seemed that every town he came to might be his last, every spread he visited would be the place of his burial.

That was why, each time he paused in his drifting, he let his mind go buckarooing down the years to better things he had known, because he never could be sure when he'd have that opportunity again. And when he died, he wanted to die with those memories in his head and in his heart.

There was that girl, his girl, that Annabelle Girl—Cort Lacey slipped a hand under his shirt and touched the expensive locket and chain that was to have been hers, and which he had carried around his neck these dozen years—Annabelle, who had taken his hands and softly asked, "You didn't kill him, did you Cort?" Again: "Tell me that Bray Blalock did it."

And she believed him—until he shot the sheriff in order to escape.

He finished his drink, now, and quoted to himself: *The past is irretrievable, and the future not yet redeemable.*

Time, in truth, had Cort Lacey on its hands, and it was piling up behind him.

The man at the back table whined, "Look't him, mister, he's lappin' your boots." And the man laughed, a racketing blatter of mirth.

Lacey faced him, pushing the yellow pup gently aside with one foot. Through his side teeth he asked the bartender, "What's his name?"

"Treeworgy," the barman grunted. "Hangs around."

"Sounds like a mouthful of flapjacks." Cort Lacey kept staring at Treeworgy—so intently that Treeworgy stared back at him, then began to study him; then leaned forward as faint puzzlement stirred his seamed features.

Still did Cort Lacey stare, disgust rising in him, washing against the thin fabric of his self-control. He knew that you don't have to find out much about a man like that. You know it all already. You know his jokes, you know the insinuative titter with which he tells them; you know how he fawns over the presence of the local banker or gambling room proprietor, and you know how he kids the girls on Apollo Street.

You know that with the combination of poverty, fear and vanity, with hardly more than one convolution per hour passing through his brain, he is perfectly designed to be robbed of his last pride and last shame and be used by himself as a flunkey, a toady, an informer, hoping to share a slice of whatever limelight is left for such as he.

He was standing up now, snatching at his hat, still frowning at Lacey. Then he put on his hat and shuffled out of the place and slammed the door behind him. Uneasiness crawled up Lacey's spine and settled in the base of his skull.

THE barman was offering a drink on the house. Cort Lacey, to his own immense surprise, accepted it. The barman said, "Yes, we got a nice town, what there is of it. Nothing much happens, though. This is a Saturday, and I might get some folks later, after the dance."

"I see."

The barman wanted to talk. "I couldn't help but notice the magnolias in your talk. Once CSA, maybe?"

"Once." He made another cigarette and lighted it. The flare of the match jerked his face from shadow and he slashed the match flame out with a snapping motion of his arm, then spewed the first gulp of smoke out over his curled-down lower lip. "Ever hear of a man calling himself Blalock?"

"Blalock?" The barman swobbed the polished wood. "No. I was Fed, myself. Contract sutler." He looked up hopefully. "Cavalry?"

"Brayton Blalock. . . . Yes, cavalry." Lacey peered through the window into the street. A rig spun past with two couples in it, laughing.

"Brayton Blalock? No, not around here. We been watching out for this—this—" the barman had to crane his neck toward the wall behind the bend of the bar—"this Cortland Lacey. They want five thousand for him in Bismarck, and ten in Dodge City."

"Lacey?"

The barman leaned closer. "A killer."

Cort Lacey swashed bourbon in his glass, then drank. "Think you'll get him?"

"Can't tell. But he's a killer, and he ought to be dead."

Lacey finished his drink. "Either killing or creating may be a crime punishable by death." He drew brightly on his cigarette in order to hide his amusement. "Death always comes by the criminal's own hand, and every man is a suicide. If a man knew how to live, he would never die."

The barman didn't know what Lacey was talking about, but he did know that he liked him. It was an affinity that men cast alone on the face of the West frequently feel for each other, without exactly knowing why. It is a gratefulness for quiet understanding

in loneliness, a mutal knowledge or instinct that somewhere in the past their souls might have touched before. The barman had killed a man once, but only once, and the animal thrill of it had stayed with him through the years. He would have liked to have known this Cortland Lacey; it was spoken through the land that Lacey had a genius for depopulation, and that if you identified his face and name to him, it was your death warrant.

Lacey knew that too, and he was ashamed of it while at the same time he defended it. It was a nasty heritage to leave after his name, but by God it was virile.

Lacey stepped on his cigarette. "Think I'll drift. Might even look in at the dance." That to cover his departure. A sneer flickered along the edge of his mind as he thought of all the good times these people would be having, and the places they would be having the good times in. *Ox Horn Barbecue Pit, Fiddle & Piano; Whistler's Grove, Bring The Family.* The people they would be having the good time with. *A rancher's daughter with a rider who was just in from fence, snuggling up in a buggy and wondering what pa would say if he found out; the local minister—if there was one—gravely bowing over Mrs. Mayor's hand*—there must be a mayor—*and asking her to dance, and hoping she wouldn't.*

And the sneer in Lacey's mind flickered like a little flame nibbling at the edge of a damp piece of paper, except that now the sneer was for himself. Something had passed out of him forever, and he could never enjoy himself again.

Over his shoulder he asked, "What made Treeworgy hurry out so fast? He got a date for the dance?"

The barman laughed. "He runs errands for Clark Kittell sometimes, and I guess he remembered he had one to run."

"Kittell?" A cold voice seemed to be echoing the name just behind Lacey's ear.

"Yeah, he's got a place about fifteen miles out—on the Cascades Trail. But his office is down the street in this town."

Cort Lacey grasped the doorknob. "Who is he?"

"He's the marshal."

Lacey took a deep, lung-cracking breath. "Thanks for the drink." He opened the door.

The barman called, "Come back and see up sometime."

"Don't forget to feed the pup."

Cort forced himself to walk slowly to the stables and take his horse. The boy was gone—to the dance, Matlock said, and explained that he never went to dances, himself. "You goin'?" he asked.

Lacey mounted. "Might look in. I've seen some pretty girls here."

Matlock pursed his lips and rolled his eyes, and Lacey left him that way.

FIFTEEN horse miles wasn't much to cover, even at night, for the Cascades Trail was smooth and wide down here in the flat country. But fifteen miles is a long way when the man you want to overtake has a head start and, in all probability, knows some short cuts.

Lacey, though, would not force the pace because of his horse. He had a kind of love for the animal, and if one of those slender legs snapped in a hole, it would be on his conscience for a long time. And he would be on his feet. So he pushed it according to *Gilham's Manual,* a stained copy of which he carried in his saddlebags.

The Manual tells you how to push the pace, but suspicion is better than the best of manuals, and angry disgust is better than suspicion. Halt ten minutes in the hour, if you can find it. Trot twenty minutes every second hour, and lead before watering. Walk, halt, trot and lead. Down the dusty miles in the moonlight, alert for ambush or the dread *snack!* of a hammer opening at your back. West toward the distant rims of the Cascades, with the vaguest hint of snow peaks showing through the silver haze. West with the dancing and laughter and

music forever at your back, and growing further away. Ahead, always, for there is no turning back, no detouring and no flinching. The trail is a chute, permitting of no leeway; it isn't the miles, it isn't the horizons, they are yours if you would seek them. It's just that you can't get off your particular trail, if you happen to be a killer.

There was a sudden commotion ahead of Cort Lacey—muffled noises in the moon shadows. There came the sound of running hoofs and the whacking of a hand on hide and the gasping of a tired rider. Lacey pulled his horse back and around and snagged out a .45 and cocked it. His horse shied sideways, nostrils wide out, blowing and steaming, eyes rolling white, head tossed in sudden panic. The coming rider topped a slope and plunged toward Lacey, whacking his foam-curded animal with a palm and crouching forward over the flying mane.

Then Lacey spurred forward and fired once at the ground and commanded the man to stop.

The man stopped—in a hailstorm of spattering pebbles and a flare of dust and a flailing of feet. He brought his winded horse down and turned it, so that he was broadside to Lacey. The animal's flanks were twitching with long nerve whips and its bits were dripping and its glistening belly was straining at the cinches. The man whined, "If this's a holdup I'm a friend o' Marshal Kittell's an' I jus' bin with him an'—"

Fury howled through Lacey and burst in his head. "Is that any way to treat a horse, Treeworgy?"

Treeworgy put his weight into his near stirrup and squinted. "Huh?"

"Get down!" Lacey flipped his gun once—just once, so that it cartwheeled right back into his palm again. "Get off!"

"Oh—it's you." Treeworgy started to lift his right leg off, then thought better of it. "Let's go back to town an' have a drink."

Lacey kneed his horse forward and circled on the forehand, so that he was behind Treeworgy with a three-quarter rear view showing what the man's arms and hands were doing. "I appreciate the offer, but I don't choose to linger with you or anybody else while the marshal works up a posse. Get off that horse!"

Anger swirled crimson in Cort Lacey's brain and he spurred against Treeworgy's left leg and grabbed the man's neckerchief and yanked him clean off the saddle—so swiftly and so savagely that Treeworgy's neck vertebra cracked and his jaws shot open in pain. Lacey flung him down like a wheat sack and he bounced once and lay with his knees drawn up and his jaw snapping open and shut in silent agony.

The man's winded horse stumbled sidewards and tripped over those updrawn knees and—before Lacey could prevent it—stepped back and sank the great weight of one groping hoof into the man's chest. It sounded like a packing case being crushed by a sledge. Then the horse jerked its hoof free and placed it down gingerly and picked its way trailside to where grass shoots were shining with night dew.

Treeworgy's mouth was still open, and so were his eyes. They were glazed, sightless forever, by the time Lacey could get to him. A throb of pity pulsed through Cort, because he hadn't particularly wanted the man to die.

He, Cort Lacey would be blamed for this death; but on the other hand, poor, useless Treeworgy would live in town legend as a man who had fought a killer on the open trail.

Lacey went to the exhausted horse and loosened the cinches and threw off the saddle. He whispered, "Good luck, whatever your name is." And then he was riding again, quartering southwest off the Cascades Trail to avoid meeting Kittell, who doubtless would be heading straight east for town with his posse, if he had one, right behind.

CHAPTER TWO

The Reluctant Killer

HE HAD one man with him, did Marshal Kittell, and the two of them came so unexpectedly out of the dawn grayness that Lacey had no time to conceal himself. Clark Kittell—the one with the tarnished badge dangling from the pocket of his flannel shirt—was a swart man with broad jowls that no razor could keep smooth for long. His eyes were wideset and—now—bone-white in the paling night; and his voice when it came to Lacey's ears was more kindly than accusative.

"Goin' somewheres?"

"Down to California."

Kittell rode closer, gesturing the other man to hang back, to cover him. His voice was less kindly as he asked, "Did a man pass you, riding fast to town?"

"He sure did." Lacey could see it all: Kittell had sent Treeworgy back at the gallop to detain him, to drink with him, while Kittell collected a posse. And the first man he had collected was this one with him, who must live south of the Cascades Trail, which was why Kittell was coming this way and not directly east from his own place. "Goin' like Ichabod Crane," Lacey added.

"Don't know the name. But what's yours?"

The light was getting more distinct, and Lacey could see Kittell's sharp green eyes. The man behind the marshal was slowly going for his gun.

Cort Lacey had two guns, and these men had one gun apiece. Therefore he considered the odds even. "My name," he said, "is Cortland Lacey."

For a moment nothing happened. Unaccountably Cort was reminded of the time on the Peninsula in '62 when he'd been riding through Centerville between the lines and collided with a Yankee and held five stiff fingers to his nose-tip in defiance; and the Yankee reflexively did the same thing and there they were, suspended for an instant in the crucible of war thumbing their noses at each other; and in that instant Cort dashed away and left the Yankee with thumb to nose, fingers wagging.

But this was different. This was Clark Kittell slowly bringing his gun level with Lacey's chest, this was the other man quietly swinging his body so that his gun was covering every part of Lacey. This was two-to-nothing, for Lacey hadn't even drawn yet. He inclined his chin and grinned sheepishly and said, "Guess you've got me, Marshal."

Then both .45's kicked hotly against his thumbs as he fired—one flaring at Kittell and the other at the man behind him. That man leapt up and doubled forward and toppled off, and his horse galloped free and frightened Kittell's horse and made it crow hop, which sent the marshal's second shot high over Lacey's head instead of straight into him.

Lacey's third bullet, meant for the marshal's chest, took him in the hand and tore the smoking gun from his fingers and sent it rattling away. Kittell's horse came apart with a writhing snake-hip motion, whirled and hurled itself back the way it had come. Cort Lacey went after it, not wanting to risk a saddle shot at the gallop until he had closed the distance to a hundred feet.

But he never did close the distance.

Kittell made a sudden wild motion with his arms as if to pry his crazed horse away from where it was going; but the horse had the bits and was out of control and was pounding toward a sandy break in the ground that Kittell had seen but which Lacey had not. The marshal screamed and tried to throw himself off his horse but the horse plunged outward over the break, legs thrashing and body twisting, and dropped from sight with Kittell only half off.

Cort Lacey brought his horse down to its haunches and slid off and jogged on foot to the edge of the break. It was about thirty yards deep, falling sheer to a stream that

flashed over its bed down below. In the first pale whelm of the rising sun, Lacey saw the marshal's broken horse lying dead in the middle of the stream, creating a barrier in the current that caused white water to gurgle against it. This side of the horse, crumpled in the mud, lay Kittell, his head and shoulders caught in the sharp rushes, his torso and legs ruffling the water.

One hundred feet, thought Lacey. And —he'd closed the distance after all. He felt no compunction to go down to the stream, because he didn't like to examine his dead men—if this one could be called one of his. The marshal had been carried off a cliff by a frightened horse, and that ended whatever intentions Lacey had had. But Lacey was the only one who knew that, and it was not knowledge that would stand sharing.

HE THREW a leg over his horse and pushed west again, riding faster than he had during the night. The new sun was warm on his back, and as he left the miles behind it mellowed to the pink hue of blood mixed with water. He experienced the uneasy sensation of unseen things closing down on him full circle around.

Time was on his side, at least. Treeworgy's body probably would not be found until about now, and it would be carried either back to town or to Kittell's place. In either case, it was unlikely that the marshal's companion would be found until afternoon, and the marshal himself, until evening. Or perhaps the people in town, enjoying a lazy Sunday after a night of dancing, would assume that Treeworgy was staying at Kittell's, if they thought of him at all.

Perhaps.

Cort Lacey rode on, leaving the boundary marker of Kittell's place behind his right shoulder, not bothering to investigate it. He tried not to notice the sun-pink hills all around him, he didn't like what the hue suggested to him.

But he couldn't avoid them, they were crowding him in. He kept whipping his glance around at odd intervals.

His conscience wasn't bothering him, because his conscience had long since become relegated to a hard case deep within him, and he only took it out and studied it when he wished to. The three men he had left on his trail meant nothing to him as men who had lived, because the equation between them and himself existed in his mind like this: I am still alive, and they are not. And that was sufficient.

A grayness was running with the wind across the skies, and he pushed west under it, face down. Ordinarily he did not like to ride during dirty weather, but now he had to. They'd be after him soon, like a pack of hounds in flush, and distance would be his best friend for awhile. Until recently, until he had tarried at that saloon and caused Treeworgy to take an interest in him, his trail had been fairly cool. But now it was simmering hot, like a wagon rim that's being used to frame roasting coals. That reminded him again of things unseen closing down full circle around—always the circle—and he rode with his head on a swivel, edging it back and forth. He rode with his personal gods—with his guns, his fast hands and his quick eyes, feeling reasonably secure because of them.

It occurred to him, thinking of security, that he was almost broke and that he would have to recoup somehow or go dirty awhile longer. He detested filth but he was becoming filthy now, and he resented it more than he did being broke, even though the one was unalterably related to the other. His linen was sandy, his collar and cuffs were soiled and he needed a shave. True, there was a change of linen in his saddlebags but it, too, was soiled. He was wearing his last clean set.

He put his inner mind—the one that wasn't concentrating on the terrain around him—to the problem of recouping his finances.

In the past, he had lived within the limits of his experience and training, not venturing into fields that were untried. Thus, he had done well as a gambler, having been deft with the cards since his teens; he had always succeeded as a town tamer, being of necessity handy with weapons and stylish in their use; and he had often been a paid killer and he was still alive. He ticked off those three possibilities in his mind as he rode, and was compelled to dismiss the last two. The first—setting up a game somewhere—appealed to him because it offered opportunity for immediate cash. He would have preferred either of the other two, but the preference was no longer his.

His eye caught a figure riding down through the aspen toward him, down from the rimrock, and he tugged his reins and reached for a gun, though he didn't draw it. The figure became a man, and the man, a face. It was a lean, Western face, clean-shaven and patched with shadow; and its owner was a lean, Western man who was letting his gotch-eared cow pony pick its own way down the rocky path.

Exhilaration feathered Cort Lacey's chest and sent sweat to his pores, for the slim chance existed that this rider might be Brayton Blalock. Lacey had heard that Blalock was drifting through these parts, and with a price on his head too. But Blalock was squareset and blond, and this man was not.

Blalock was the man who had drawled to the sheriff—a dozen years ago, in Virginia—had drawled, " 'Cawse I didn't shoot that li'l ol' bank courier, I wasn't even in the state that night. But whose gun was found near him, hey? Whose gun?" Cort Lacey's gun, of course, which Blalock had acquired by theft an hour before the killing of the courier.

The exhilaration died in Lacey's chest and was replaced with a tautness, a warning to get ready. It wasn't probable that this lean rider was hunting for him, but it was possible.

LACEY judged him to be about his own age, but not of his professional pursuits. This man looked to be a rancher.—you could tell it by his jeans, by his chap hooks and by his saddlery. He wasn't wearing a gun, either. He had slumbrous eyes and an affable manner. He asked for a match and Lacey gave him one.

The man asked, "Know Clark Kittell? You must've crossed his land."

"No, I came up from the California line. Think I'll head for the Coast."

That word flung an image into his mind: San Francisco and a huge saloon with frosted mirrors and crystal side lamps; and a man inquiring cautiously, "Isn't your name Lacey? Didn't you tame the town of Mariscotta once—an' kill a man called Todhunter?" Gun coming out now: "He was my brother."

The flaming smash of shots, the scramble of customers for safety—and Lacey escaping too, leaving another dead man in his spur tracks. There were dodgers for him on the Coast now.

The rancher said, "The Coast? Heap of mountains to cross." His grin broke wide. "I got a spread in 'em, just me an' some cows an' a Mexkin—for company more'n anythin' else. He cooks good, an' watches the place when I'm gone. My name's Petersen, Lew Petersen."

"Mine's Blalock."

They shook hands stiffly. Petersen said, "I'm goin' down now to visit up awhile with ol' Clark an' scrounge Sunday dinner from him."

"The marshal?"

"Thought you didn't know him."

"I said I didn't cross his land. I know who he is, though. I'm in the same business. Special deputy out lookin' for Cortland Lacey."

"Lacey?" Petersen scratched the back of his neck in thought. He was now at that brink of destiny where so many men ride, but don't know it. And it's just as well that they don't, because a little knowledge is a

dangerous thing, and their ignorance protects them.

If they were aware of their danger, they would act unnaturally and perhaps too quickly, and they would die. But most of them are not aware of it, and they ride away from the brink without ever knowing that they were near it. With Lew Petersen, all he had to do now was glance up and remark that you, Mr. Blalock, bear a strong resemblance to this Lacey, and—making a pass for Lacey's guns—you'd better come down to Kittell's with me and give yourself up.

Cort Lacey watched him narrowly. He watched him take his hand from his neck and he watched him rub his cigarette absently between his fingers. Lacey, sitting at the brink of Petersen's destiny, was coldly aware that the man could continue to be what he was—a small rancher with a Mexican cook and a fairly easy future; or a spraddled corpse in the aspens with a clean blue hole in his head.

Then Petersen said, "No, I don't recall any Lacey, I'm pretty sure."

So, because of his ignorance, he moved away from the brink and lived. "Well, thanks for the match. Good luck with your man." And he trailed on down-country, leaving a faint ghost of tobacco smoke in the air.

Cort Lacey was now faced with a decision based upon time and distance. This was Sunday—Sunday mid-morning, judging from the position of the sun—Cort had hocked his watch in Omaha—and assuming that nobody had yet found Treeworgy or the others, Lew Petersen wouldn't have cause for alarm until he reached Kittell's place, or maybe after. Therefore, Lacey had a solid half-day's start that he could with luck parlay up to a day's start. The Cascades Range is huge, and a man could hole-up in it for months without being found. He could hide there until it pleased him to move, and then he could move out in any direction he chose.

So Lacey followed Petersen's back-trail toward the rimrock, intent upon acquiring food and a tub of water while he had the time.

Petersen's spread was a dog-trot with a barn behind it and a spring house in front of it. Toward the rear, near what must be the cooking room, flies hummed around a saltbox shed that was hip-high to a man, and which must be for garbage. Garbage meant food.

The Mexican came out with a seven-shot Spencer on his arm and waved Lacey away. Lacey threw off and requested food and water.

"Para mi y mi caballo."

The Mexican showed ragged brown teeth and bowed with the greatest politeness, except that Lacey observed that his eyes were like slits withdrawn into the cavities of his skull. The señor desired food? Ah—the Mexican was desolated, but his orders from the Señor Petersen. . . .

Lacey pushed the Spencer aside. "For my horse first. After that, for me."

The Mexican back-stepped, crouching, and Lacey paced him so that the man couldn't swing the rifle to bear. The man was pleading, "Please go away, leave this place—"

Lacey's long right arm lashed out smoothly and belted the man's jaws shut and knocked him down. The rifle clumped into the dust.

The Mexican propped himself up on one elbow and touched his jaws with much tenderness and sucked his shattered teeth.

Lacey told him to get up. "I know the Señor Petersen. He's an old friend. He says it's all right."

The Mexican put his head to one side and cautiously inquired if—since the senor knew the Señor Petersen—the señor could recall the color of the Señor Petersen's hair?

Cunning slipped across his face, and he crabbed out his fingers for the rifle.

Lacey stepped on the man's hand. He'd

had enough of this cat-and-mouse, his nerve net was raw to the ganglia already and he was damned if the color of someone's hair was going to go and obstruct him now.

He thought of tying the Mexican, but that would take too long—the hunt for rope, and where to put him—so he reached down for the rifle instead, to force the Mex to show him to food.

The Mexican yanked his hand from under Lacey's instep and flung himself toward the rifle. He was not so lucky as his employer. He went over the brink with two bullet holes in his face and the back of his head blown for fifteen feet all over the yard. Lacey blew smoke from the lips of his .45's, reloaded and holstered.

He gazed with sadness at the body at his feet, reflecting that the little fellow had moved so stupidly and died so unnecessarily. Lacey's shooting had been stylish, but in his opinion it had been as unnecessary as the Mexican's death. The man should have had more sense than to snatch at the rifle when Cortland Lacey was reaching for it. And there had been no time for argument, for on the killer's trail, it is always time to move. There is no rest and no peace.

Cort wasted another few seconds staring at the little Mexican who lay with arms out and fingers curled. There he lay with the flies already coming. . . .

THERE he lay, and Lacey told him silently, Maybe you're lucky after all, and have a smoother future than your boss, Petersen. If you'd lived, you'd have eked out your life tending cows or herding goats or changing stagecoach teams or planting milpas or brewing illicit tiswin, and you would have carried your perplexed soul in your body until it got free somehow and floated off to where you prayed to be.

. . . . If you hadn't reached for that rifle, little fella.

Am I getting soft?

Lacey spun on his heel and marched to the house and found the cooking room and packed some airtights into his pockets, while he munched a large slice of pan bread. He took the airtights out and stowed them in his flat saddlebags, then led his horse to a feed bin.

Ten minutes later, he was pushing into the high country, up into the Cascades, his face whipping nervously left and right, his portside saddlebag heavy with the weight of the buckled-in Spencer rifle.

He heard the tinkle of his locket chain—that locket was becoming a snag that tripped his thinking with uncomfortable frequency—and he thought again of Annabelle.

He thrust her image from his mind as a parched man will push a heady drink from him, because he knows that the taste and effect are at the best ephemeral, leaving but a teasing memory afterward.

There are no soft-handed girls on the killer's trail, only the dim echo of their laughter in tortured dreams; there is no music and no dancing, only the dreariness and loneliness of empty miles that hold in their emptiness the thin, persistent whisper of threat.

That, and the awesome knowledge that you have tossed your youth into this empty void and that it will die there, never to ripen into anything fulsomely decent and worthy of the dignity of years.

Cort Lacey reached for a gun and lifted it and cocked it—all in one swift motion. The bushes ahead were stirring, but there was no breeze. It was an antelope jack, and he barked it in the haunch as it dodged away, and killed it with his second shot. He didn't want to eat it, the shooting of it had been a reflex action, a nerve reaction to something strange that had startled him. For the lift and fall of a heartbeat he pitied it as he rode past; and then the pity left him as he reflected that it had been good target practice after all, very good target practice indeed.

CHAPTER THREE

The Posse Forms

CLARK KITTELL recovered consciousness with his face in the cold mud of the stream where he had fallen. The sharp rushes all around his head were leaning to the force of the current like dead men's hair, and he batted some of them away from his bruised face with his good hand. His other hand was a lump of throbbing pain where Lacey's bullet had torn across it.

The marshal sat up slowly and gingerly, patting himself all over for fractures. But there were no fractures, only painful bruises and an aching stomach and the shot-ripped knuckles. He put his eyes to the stream and saw his dead horse out there with the white water boiling against it, and he limped to it and recovered his saddle and bridle. He couldn't bury the animal; he'd have to leave it for the vultures.

Dull anger was beating in him like the steady pulsings of a tom-tom, and he was trying to hold it down. He was trying to hold it down because he knew that if it burst up into his brain he would do illogical things, and that would be dangerous on his job. He had held that job for seven years and he liked it. In addition to being an adjunct to the maintaining of his homestead, it gave him a larger equity in the town which was his home, a deeper stake in the land.

Therefore he kept the blade of his anger dulled as he trudged away from the stream with his saddle over his shoulder, and did not permit himself the luxury of relaxing into killing anger. Killing anger meant that he would snap a gun onto the next stranger he met and, likely as not, fire before he spoke. Killing anger meant that he would wear out his own horses and those of his friends while searching for Cortland Lacey, and logic warned him that wornout horses do not track down outlaws. Consequently, killing anger would be bad for Kittell and, by projection, bad for his town.

Too, the marshal had no evidence that Lacey had killed anybody in that town or near it, only that he had tried to. That thought came to him after he had tramped three or four miles in the hot Sunday sunlight with his saddle weighing him down, when the initial anger was sweated out of him, leaving only a residue of cold and revengeful logic. He was reasoning that if Treeworgy had passed Lacey unmolested last night, Treeworgy must by now be in town and, having found Lacey gone, must be starting back to Kittell's to report.

And then the marshal came across the man who had been covering him from behind, the first man he had asked to join his posse, the one who had been toppled from his saddle by Lacey's second shot.

This man's name was Eddie Burrows, and he was lying face-down in the sand with one leg doubled under him. Clark Kittell knelt and probed with his fingers, lifting Burrows gently over and at the same time shielding those red-rimmed eyes from the sun with his body. "Eddie?"

Burrows swallowed a couple of times, and closed his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was low in his throat, like the voice of a child from another room. "Hullo—Clark."

"Bad?"

Eddie Burrows moved his head up and down. "Bad . . . lungs."

Kittell unbuttoned the man's torn and brown-caked shirt and examined the wound. It was dead-center of the breastbone, but too low for the heart. The thought was quick in him—damned good shooting, even though it was a chance shot at that range and in that light. But damned good shooting.

And: *Stop admiring the technique!*

"Eddie? Can you hear me?"

Burrows swallowed again. "Where is he, Clark?"

"Got away. Think you can walk, if I help you?"

Eddie Burrows opened his eyes, and smiled. It was a thin smile, the bare moving of lip corners. "You go ahead, Clark. Where I'm goin'—I'll need no help."

"Hogwash! Come on, let me slide this arm of yours around my neck and together we'll—" Kittell clamped down on the rest of it, because Eddie Burrows wasn't listening to him and it wasn't Eddie Burrows' fault; he would never hear anything again, ever.

THE marshal found Burrows' hat and placed it oved his face. Later, after Kittell had reached his own place and gotten horses, he would return and pick up the body. The anger in him squeezed out every other emotion and all he could do for several moments was tremble, and open and close his big fists, and blink his cold, green eyes.

He prowled in widening circles, muttering to himself, until he found his gun in the sand where it had skidded from his wounded hand. He picked it up and wiped dirt from it, reloaded it and holstered it. Then he remembered that Lew Peterson was due for dinner today. If Cort Lacey had struck directly west toward the bench country, there was a chance that the two must have met on the trail. The speculation chilled the marshal's heart but it warmed his feet, and he marched west toward his place, alternately walking and trotting.

He was slimy with sweat when he reached home, and his lungs were searing vitriol every time he emptied and filled them. He staggered toward the pump to rinse himself down when Lew Petersen trotted in and dismounted. Lew grinned. "Where you bin, Clark, huntin' our dinner on foot?"

The marshal stopped in the act of peeling off his shirt and stared at Petersen until Petersen stepped closer, sniffing. "Been at the bottle so early?"

"God, man!" Kittell pitched his shirt aside. "You all right?"

Lew Petersen said calmly, "Cold water, like you were headin' for, will fix you up fine. Then some black coffee, so thick you can leave a thumb print in it, an'—"

"Lissen, Lew." The marshal reached and took him firmly by the triceps and held him. "Did you meet a man on your way down here? Maybe thirty-five or forty, with grayish hair and—"

"Blalock, he said his name was. Special deppity lookin' for this Lacey sharp. Said he should've stopped in on you." And in that instant realization came to Lew Petersen and he found himself staring back at Kittell. The strength seemed to seep from his leg muscles and leave them tallow, and he had to hang onto the marshal even as the marshal hung onto him. "Lacey?" he whispered it.

"Lacey," the marshal repeated huskily. "Rode me off a cliff, and shot Eddie Burrows just before that."

They broke off their stares and Lew Petersen fumbled with the makings, spilling tobacco in his nervousness. He had trouble swallowing and he couldn't seem to make spit for the paper. "I'm right sorry, Clark. I swallered his yarn whole an'—"

"Look at me!" Kittell beat his hair-tangled chest with thumping fists. "Sworn to protect the area—and he knocks the gun out of my hand and rides me into the river! What the hell are you so sorry for?" Then he dropped his fists and let out his breath.

Petersen succeeded in lighting his cigarette, but it didn't taste good and he crumbled it apart. "Reckon we better throw a rope on this Lacey. Can you lend me a gun?"

"Wait'll I get another shirt and a horse." Kittell led the way to the house, walking fast. "Treeworgy, for all his idiot ways, spotted Lacey last night in town and hustled out here to tell me." They entered the house and Kittell offered a bottle to Petersen while he pitched his arms into a fresh shirt. "I sent Treeworgy back to keep Lacey cooled down while I went to get Eddie.

I needed at least one other man, just to be sure. Lacey's quick as a cat." They stamped out to the corrals with the taste of whiskey on their lips. "Then Eddie and me bumped into him, near dawn, and the ball opened. Your horse ready for the hills?"

"We both are. Neither of us been in a hurry for ten years."

"You're both going to hurry now, brother . . . Here's the gun."

Petersen took it, shading his eyes east in the direction of town. "You got more company comin'."

It was a group of horsemen coming fast in a spanking cloud of high-flying dust. The thin legs of the running animals flashed ahead of the dust as if they could escape it, and the riders were a cluster of bobbing hats. The group swayed slightly left and right as it came, after the manner of horsemen who try to keep together but who must succumb to the inertia of speed.

Hoofs snare-drummed up to Kittell's gate and the horsemen milled against it, kicked it open and poured through. They stopped in the choking backwash of their own dust, and one of them—Marvin Dye, Hides & Feed, chairman of the town council—came forward on foot. He did not indulge in the amenities, but got right to the point.

"Clark, your man Treeworgy was found on the trail this morning with his chest caved in. His horse was nearby, with its saddle off."

Kittell had been fearing this since the night before. "No bullet wounds?" He had not been overly-fond of Treeworgy, but he had felt responsible for him.

"None."

Lew Petersen's eyes opened wide and he touched his chest in several places. "Caved in?" He stared at Kittell. "The man must be ravin' mad!"

"Lacey? Yes, he must be." Kittell told Marvin Dye what had happened, not sparing his own embarrassment.

Dye did not waste time. "You ready to ride? We've all packed dry rations and feed. We should overtake Lacey within a day, at least."

"That depends on how far he's gone into the hills."

Dye mounted impatiently. "Which way do you figure he went?"

"Straight west. He passed Lew, here, early this morning. Nine or ten o'clock. It's almost three now." The marshal suddenly knelt and scooped up a fistful of dust and switched it out through his fingers in little gray spurts. Then he held his open hand to his eyes and stared at the dust that remained sweat-stuck to his broad palm. He stared at it with eyes that were terrible, as if he could promise it something if it only would listen and understand. And then he wiped his hand on his thigh, and snapped it clean. "Nobody can do this to us, Marvin."

"Somebody already has."

Kittell and Petersen led out through the gate and pointed west along the Cascades Trail. The marshal faced back and announced to Marvin Dye, "We'll go directly to Lew's spread and pick up his Spencer rifle. There's a telescopic sight for it, and we can use it."

"Ride faster," Marvin Dye ordered.

CORT LACEY was sitting his horse with his left leg straight down in the stirrup and his right leg raised, so that the thigh was a table for the can of tomatoes he was digging with his fingers. He had made a dry camp the night before—Sunday night—but he hadn't slept much. He would doze, then snap awake with his hands on his guns, staring into the wind-swept darkness. And an uncomfortable thought had been nudging him all night: he had neglected to conceal the antelope jack he'd shot the day before, stupidly leaving it to mark a spot where he had been.

He was well up into the rocky ribs of the Cascades now, taking advantage of passes

and draws to stay off the sky line; and as he ate he was computing to himself the chances of a posse cutting his trail that day. The weather had abated, the skies were dry and it wasn't likely that he had left noticeable marks in too many places. But he couldn't be sure. He was tiring, he was dirty of face and hands and his linen itched. The flushed blood of near-fatigue was held just beneath his skin in weeping capillaries, and his eyes were hound-dog pink. He didn't much resemble the Cortland Lacey who in the past had brought the same negligent deftness to the teacups that he had brought to his weapons or to the gaming tables.

He needed a drink, and as he finished the tomatoes he hummed a song to himself, the one that begins, *Once in October I woke up sober* . . . He didn't finish it, though, because it was a mockery to his insecurity and to his latent fears, which were beginning to squirm inside him and urge him onward. There he sat, trying not to feel his loneliness or his dread or the threatening emptiness of the piled up mountain ranges converging on him in a vast and whirling radius, lashed by the riata of oncoming night.

And suddenly he was a little boy again, with the irresponsibility of boyhood; suddenly and dreamily he was young Mast' Co't, handsome as sin in his unbearded brightness and proud as hell as he and his beribboned little sister quirted their first ponies over the broad green reaches of Cortland Hall with laughter in their mouths and the joy of fine living in their eyes. The dogs were coursing ahead of the ponies, tails flashing like banners, and birds broke and scattered and a shotgun clumped and Cort and his sister shouted triumphantly. Cortland Hall, though, was now eight gaunt chimneys and a blackened foundation, and the dogs were gone and so were the birds, and so was the little boy on the pony. Forever.

He tensed in the saddle; the clump of memory's shotgun was somehow becoming frighteningly real. From down there in the lower passes. Or maybe it had been the wind bumping through a narrow gorge.

He dismounted and carefully buried the tomato can, then mounted and pushed on. He followed the windings of the ridges, watching the dusk ahead of him, listening for the muted rumor of horses behind him. That noise back there—if it hadn't been the wind it must have been the posse shooting a bird or a rabbit for supper, which in Lacey's opinion was foolish. But then, men with town-bound brains are apt to be foolish, and make undue noise.

Lacey stopped to give his horse a blow and to check the cinches and saddlebags. Ahead of him lay a mass of rough mountain escarpments and rivers lying deep in sheer-walled canyons, and he pushed at a walk into those mountains while the night wore on and the silence deepened.

In the false dawn he stopped in some timber overlooking a meadowed highway through the hills, slanting upward. He staked his horse and rubbed it and fed it, then hunkered down in some pine needles to doze.

It was fitful and nightmarish. The staccato rapping of a woodpecker became in his ears and conscience the rattling of gunfire; the stamping of his own horse became the posse riding him down. Finally he quit his position, feeling more tired than before, and chanced entering the broad meadow that led up to the northwestern peaks. He had to follow that route because of the speed it offered, though he knew well that he would be exposed to anyone who might be close enough.

Under darkness he rode the miles down, pausing only at trickling creeks to water his horse; he couldn't get rid of his haste, and his frayed nerves saw trouble in every shadow and gave him the notion that ears were everywhere around him, listening, and that men were surrounding him in preparation for a rush.

Then he himself did a foolish thing: he whipped out a gun and fired at a bush, certain that it concealed a lurking figure. The report of the shot rumbled and rocketed away in every direction, filling the night with an unholy racket, echoing on and on. And all he had for it was a shredded branch . . . Certainly any posse, any group of men within two hours of him, would have heard that shot and, with their eyes closed and their mouths open, traced the course of the echoes as surely as navigators take bearings while running a coast line.

IN THE first streaky moments of dawn, when Polaris was sputtering weakly in the sky, Cort Lacey turned out of the meadow and sought higher ground. But even as he reached it with the daylight, he felt naked and exposed. A sitting duck. It would be better to lose himself in some box canyon, one of a thousand hidden pockets, than stay here. But that would be the slow way, and his jumping nerves pricked him into more direct action. He swung his bits northward again, and used his spurs.

Once he stopped on a stony rise and sat there deliberately for five hundred beats of his heart, defying a bullet to come whickering into him. He listened tensely for the sound of a shot, expecting it, almost wanting it, so that he could join battle and end this formless retreat. But nothing came except the scolding of jays and the far tapping of a woodpecker and the whisper of the morning wind breathing through the trees.

A fine sweat clung to his face as he rode, and he had to stretch his lungs in order to fill them. It occurred to him that he was climbing higher all the time. Toward noon the trail he was following—a mere openness in the terrain—rose through a notch. He spurred up through it until it came to a bush-bearded ridge from which the country below was visible for a mile.

He curled up in a stand of pines and tried to doze, but it seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when he heard the sound of horses from below. He took the rifle and sat up, then rolled over and crawled to the lip of the ridge, snaking his way silently through the bushes.

He saw a dozen riders below him, standing their horses without pattern, as if they had no plan and didn't know which way to go. It surprised him that Kittell was one of the riders, for he had supposed that the marshal was forever dead in the stream at the bottom of that sand cliff. It did not particularly surprise him that Lew Peterson was there, or that his manner was no longer affable. Petersen was as alert as a setter with the wind in its nose.

Something of the hypocrisy of the situation came to Cort Lacey, because bone-deep in him was the knowledge that these men—that all men inside the law—saw their own latent weaknesses mirrored in him, and they resented the living reflection and so had to destroy it.

Kittell was saying, "I think he's slipped us, Marvin." The words lifted up to Lacey on the breeze.

The man called Marvin shook his head. "I think he's running like a rabbit. Let's go up through that notch."

"No, he cut west sometime last night. He couldn't have come this far without leaving a sign of some sort."

Marvin was entirely convinced. "He's a scared rabbit."

"No, he isn't. Anyway, rabbits always circle when pursued."

"All right, Clark. You go back to where you think he turned west, and I'll climb through that notch and have a look at the land beyond it."

Lacey wondered what manner of commercial crimes the man Marvin had committed.

"No," Kittell ruled. "When I come back this way, if I don't find where he turned west, I'll shoot anything I see moving ahead of me, and it might be you. But I'll compromise, Marvin. We'll fan out west, staying within sight of each other, and if we

don't spot his trail by twilight, we'll swing north again. In any case, we'll be between him and where he wants to go, which I think is the Coast."

Marvin frowned. "Maybe we could hunt for him six and six. Remember that he's got the rifle he took from Lew's Mexican. If we could make him spread his fire, use up his bullets faster. . . ."

Cort Lacey had the sights of the Spencer on Kittell, and there was no doubt in his mind what he must do: kill the marshal, and when the others were facing toward the swaying body, pick them all off. He had persuaded himself to fire when Kittell said, "Come on, we won't split the posse." And they wheeled and trotted west across the lower plateau. Again had ignorance won.

Until twilight, Lacey eyed the sun and estimated that he had five hours left in which to create distance. He had a wild impulse to slip south behind the posse and re-enter the mountains at another point, but simultaneously it came to him that that would do no ultimate good because it would take him three times as long to regain heights that he had already gained. He watched the posse disappear into the rough bends of a ravine, and he silently chastised them for not following the ravine's rims, where they could see better. But town men. . . .

Lacey rose reluctantly, repacked the rifle and mounted. He considered setting a trap as he rode, because the posse was careless in the way it boomed along and apparently it had no great fear of him. In numbers there is strength, but overconfidence rides ahead of a fall.

He came to a creek and turned into it and rode for a hundred yards through its course, then swung north again with a water-broken trail behind him. He was overworking his horse and he knew it, but it couldn't be helped. He had to reach higher country before twilight came, and post him-

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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self where he could see the largest possible number of routes of approach to his position.

He found his spot late in the afternoon: the head of a blind canyon which the posse would have to investigate. He pegged his horse beyond it, north of it, and crawled into some rocks and gazed below him. He had a field of fire of about eighty degrees, and he could hit a man with his first rifle bullet anywhere up to four hundred yards, which was half the length of the canyon.

He could not know what was about to happen to him, for the gods of tomorrow maintain a lofty silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trail's End

IT WAS NOT quite twilight when he heard the faint vibrations of their coming. He took a few trial sights with the Spencer, and waited. They filed toward the open end of the canyon, riding carelessly and loosly scattered. Marvin and Kittell were leading, and Petersen was bringing up the rear. It was Kittell whom Lacey wanted; he figured that if he could bag the marshal first, the others would become momentarily disorganized and he could dust them off without having to use his revolvers at all. Besides, Kittell was supposed to be dead, and there wasn't any reason in Lacey's mind why he shouldn't be.

But something went wrong.

Just as the riders reached the mouth of the canyon, Kittell called an order over his shoulder and wagged an arm back and forth.

The posse split, six and six, and trotted up to the canyon's rims and bore down on Lacey's position from two sides. Marvin's advice had been heeded.

There was nothing for Lacey to do now except what he did: squeeze off one shot at Marvin's jingling watch chain, whirl to his feet and dodge back to his horse. He heard a howl of pain; the dusk was slashed apart by the loud indignation of barking revolvers. A bullet whanged off the rock Lacey had been hiding behind.

He was riding. He bent his horse around a curve in the trail and had a minute of shelter; but the trail petered out into chopped hillsides that rose in a steep slant that was zig-zagged with a series of switchbacks. Lacey took to the switchbacks because he had no choice, and for five minutes he was exposed in the afterlight of the dead sun as he spur-gouged his horse up the hill. He jumped when the first shot rapped through the thickening dusk. The bullet splashed gravel below him. He kept climbing his horse grinding wind heavily in and out. Another shot came, and fell short. Then he realised that there were no horses coming, only creeping men. They were still respecting that rifle, even though they could see that he wasn't using it. He topped the hill, faced around, raised the rifle and fired at a dark figure that was kneeling behind a boulder. The figure jerked from sight. It was the foreshortened distance of the sharply rising hill that had deceived them and sent their shots below Lacey.

Then full darkness came down and he gained flat country beyond the hill; some of the tension went out of him, and he let his horse slow to a walk. They wouldn't pursue in darkness, he was sure of that. They might fan out and sneak forward, testing possible resistence; but there would be no organized advance to ride him down or flush him out.

He dismounted and led his horse by its bits, feeling his way carefully. The moon was not yet up, and he preferred to have one of his own ankles twisted in a pot hole than have the horse suffer the accident. His throat was so dry that the flesh was brittle, and he couldn't get enough air. He hoped that his horse could go thirsty awhile longer without suffering too much; he wished that he'd taken a canteen or water bottle from Petersen's place. With a horse,

it's different. A horse deserves water and plenty of it, and when he doesn't get it he doesn't understand why, and you can't tell him. But a man knows why he's thirsty, and can appreciate the reasons for it, and can hold out. Not so with a horse.

And something else was wrong, though not with the horse. Cort Lacey was getting scared. Soggy fear was softening his spine and his heart and leaving his fingertips cold. He had known animal fear before, warning instinct; he'd shaken hands with that during the War and after, when it had been a defense against coming danger. But never in his life had he tussled with the soul-slobbering supineness that can become arrant cowardice, devoid of all instinct—fear not of danger, but of death. It is a tussle that is easy to lose.

He walked all night, and to hell with *Gilham's Manual.* He stopped twice at streams that chuckled through their runs, and each time he fell flat on his face up-current of his drinking horse and drank in great strangling, greedy gusts, rooting his face through the water like a snouting hog.

He led on through the murky night, glad that the moon was soiled by marching clouds. He stumbled north with his head rolling and his belly tight and his booted feet afire with blisters. Still would he not risk mounting and letting his horse snap a fetlock in a hole.

It was almost dawn before he realised that he had been sobbing for some time.

Maybe that can't be helped, when the trail is closing down and your best years are used up and there is nothing much ahead but ragged horizons that don't beckon to you any more, but repel you. The cold green fear in him was giving rise to black regrets; he succumbed to them and tasted their bitterness and found them in keeping with his mood.

He thought, *If I hadn't run from that Reconstruction sheriff, and had stood to explain; if I hadn't taken a thousand dollars to tame a town . . . if I hadn't fled from Bismarck that time . . . if I hadn't insulted Treeworgy with my stare—why, today I'd be rebuilding Cortland Hall and Annabelle would be there, and maybe Cort Junior, or who knows? If I—shut up, Cort!*

The sun was coming up, and he mounted.

He was rounding a sharp bend in the gray folds of the hills when he heard a voice drawl, "That's far enough."

FOR a moment he thought it was his own voice, and that he was becoming delirious. He saw a pile of weathered logs in a juniper thicket above him, and noted that they were fashioned into a crude lean-to, with a yawning black void for a front.

Deluded by weariness into thinking that it was his own voice that had spoken, he drew a gun and slipped from the saddle and started up toward the junipers. Immediately he felt the wrongness of the place, and started to scramble down to his horse, thoroughly frightened.

"Stop there!" the voice commanded.

Lacey's stomach fluttered and grew hollow. He turned slowly, feeling sweat trickle down his ribs and legs, wondering wherever it could be coming from. A man stepped from the lean-to and held a blunt-nosed rifle on Lacey. The man was square-set with a sagging, unshaven face and hard eyes. For a desperate moment Lacey thought that it was Clark Kittell, but it wasn't. It was Brayton Blalock.

They regarded each other without speaking. Blalock wasn't blonde any more, he was fuzzy gray. He seemed flaccid, as if he hadn't eaten steadily for some time but hadn't exercised much, either. His flesh hung in wrinkled layers from his bones. He said, "I thought you might come trackin' through these hills someday." He swung the rifle forward. "Put up your gun, Cort!"

Lacey put it up. "This doesn't really surprise me, Bray. I heard you were 'round here somewheres."

"I've got to take your horse, Cort. I lost mine."

Cort Lacey stiffened, and some of the weariness washed from him and left him cool and easy in the limbs. "Like you lost my gun during your first killing, and put the sheriff after me for it?"

"Like you lost your head and shot the sheriff?" Blalock laughed, without moving his eyes from Lacey. "Drop your belt where you're standing, then we'll talk. I think you might like to hear about your girl, Annabelle. She married that fella from down—"

Lacey's hands froze on his belt buckle. There was absolute blankness on his face, and then absolute murderousness. It resembled the face of a man who had been trapped and died in the snow long ago, centuries ago; and the glacier brings it down all those centuries, inch by inch, and suddenly with its primitive fury and lethal intent it stares out through the last preserving glaze of ice.

Blalock had stopped talking. His rifle moved almost imperceptibly and Cort Lacey's hand blurred up and down and the two .45's sang together and tore the tension apart and Blalock's rifle exploded and then he was sitting on his butt in the junipers and staring unbelievingly at his ripped shirt where Lacey's bullets had punched through. Then he flopped over on his side and lay still, and the last breath he ever took in life ran out of him and rustled the leaves near his nostrils.

Cort Lacey had been numbed by Blalock's bullet, but now he felt pain slice through him.

He had been hit in the right leg. The odor of blood was in the air and his senses ran out on him for a moment, leaving him dumb and cold. Then the pain accumulated into one rolling shock wave and revived him with acute misery. His right leg burned from hip to knee and he kicked it out straight with a savage wish to know the worst. But it wasn't broken, it was only creased.

He felt weak all over, as if he had just drunk up a three-month thirst and was coming to a roach-ridden cot in some cheap hotel. He was sick and he was exhausted. His knees shook when he pulled himself up into the saddle, and he felt stiffness crawl along his muscles like paralysis.

He held still for perhaps thirty seconds, or until a great fright made him whip his head around. Far away in the country behind him, he had heard—or thought he heard—the faint beating of hoofs. He listened for a full ten minutes, but the sound did not recur. He concluded that it had been the wind flattening some treetop branches, ruffling their foliage and releasing them to scrape against each other before they straightened again.

He tapped his rowels tiredly, and the horse went forward. He tried to concentrate on what might lay ahead, while ignoring that which had just passed. He felt no emotion over killing Brayton Blalock, no reaction; he had no desire to conceal the body; if the posse came this way it would investigate the lean-to anyway, and find the signs of a hastily dug grave.

He felt no elation or sense of satisfaction that the cause of his course through life the past dozen years was now removed. That cause, Blalock, had become too tenuous a link with reality, and its removal could not erase all that had followed. Lacey had always considered his first killing—that of the Virginia sheriff—to have been in self-defense, but there had been no time to explain that. Reconstruction was the law then, and when a demobilized Reb officer murders a Yankee official, even if the official is chasing him with a rope and a gun, why. . . .

Of course he should have quit then, and been satisfied that he had escaped through Kentucky to Missouri. But when a river town offered him a thousand dollars to clean it up and blast out its bad element, he had started to earn his living with his guns. And some friends of the deceased bad element ran him down, and he'd had to kill them to

stay alive. And after that he'd made a mistake in a poker game and had to shoot his way out. Then there'd been a warrant out for him and, evenutally, warrants. Dodge City, Bismarck. . . . He should have stopped when he could, but time had taken over and now it had him.

RIDING west, he kept switching his bloodshot eyes left and right for water in which to wash his wound, but the country here was rocks and hillocks and granite escarpments, bone-dry.

One thing he had learned today was what had happened to Annabelle. She had married that man from down the river, down by Pamunkey. A slim man—Lacey had met him once at a post-belhum ball when everybody was pretending that there had been no troubles—a slim man with a shy manner and burning black eyes. Well, so be it and maybe she was happy. Lacey hoped so, sincerely. She was the only girl he had ever loved.

He slipped a hand under his filthy shirt and felt the locket once. He'd never had the chance to give it to her, of course, but he had always felt that it was hers, and that touching it was like taking her hand for a moment. She had never known that he had it or that he was planning to give it to her as an engagement present from himself; but he had always kept it, fingering it when he needed courage and when the way was dark and decisions not easy. He fingered it now, rubbing its hard smoothness between his fingers fitfully, rubbing it with the ball of his thumb.

Suddenly something moved ahead of him, and he braced himself for more trouble. It was something white flickering to and fro in a stand of trees, and as he looked at it, the unmistakable smell of cows came down to him on the wind. He rode closer and saw that there was a wash line stretched from a small building to a nearby tree, with wash flapping from it. That meant that a woman was here. It meant that Lacey was approaching a ranch, and that the rancher was married, or anyway was living with his daughter if not with his wife.

Again did the old questions pose themselves to him: *Will this be the last place I'll visit? Will this be the scene of my burial?*

A woman.

He raised curled fingers to his jaws and scratched his three-day beard. It disgusted him. He cast around for a creek in which to wash the crusted blood from his leg—his thigh was a heavy numbness now—and in which to shave, but there was none. Then a dog spotted him and yelped and bounded out to meet him. It was a big dog with a slapping tongue and a swaying tail and, having had experience with horses, it kept clear but continued to bark in both challenge and greeting.

This was a place of poverty, but not of uncleanliness; what there was of it was neat and well-tended. It was set in a dry point landscape of black and white shadows, the buildings were in good repair and the yard was policed. The three little girls wore patched clothing but they wore it well bebecause both it and they had recently been scrubbed.

The man sauntered out and eyed Lacey with overt suspicion. When Lacey smiled and touched his hat, some of the suspicion melted and the man said that his name was Merle Husted. The woman came out and gazed at Lacey from the shadow of her bonnet bill, her hands dripping wild onion peelings. She was a small, straight woman with an understanding eye and a firm mouth.

Lacey got down and played with the dog for a minute. He apologized for his appearance and asked if he could wash, after he'd handled his horse; and Husted said, "Sure, I'll take your horse and you go ahead and dip at the wooden tub under the rain-catcher, there." And, with no suspicion at all now: "How'd you hurt your leg?"

"Accident. I was cleaning my gun. Nothing serious, though."

"I don't like guns, myself. Not around the children." Merle Husted was taller than his wife, though he had her simple dignity and honest directness. "It isn't often we have a chance to talk to someone other'n ourselves. Man come by here the other day, said his name was Lacey"—the breath shot from Lacey's lungs—"but I knew darned well it wasn't. He wanted a feed, and we gave him one. Then he took out. Later that night I caught him sneakin' near my gully fence like he might be tryin' to cut out some cows. I missed him but I killed his horse." Husted was leading Lacey's horse toward a trough. "Never did see him again. Fat man with a funny drawl."

"You knew his name wasn't Lacey?" Cort was bending over the tub, attending to himself. The woman and the girls had discreetly withdrawn.

"That's right." Husted didn't explain.

Lacey kept his guns on. Fear coursed through his veins as he bandaged his wound, adjusted his trousers and started to shave. He nicked himself twice with the razor. But when Mrs. Husted called them to the midday meal, he looked more like his old self than he had for days.

Husted lowered his face over his plate, and proclaimed Grace: "To everything there is a reason, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill' "—he passed his eyes to Lacey —" 'and a time to heal'." He raised his head, and coughed. "Ecclesiastes, III . . . Mother, please pass the meat."

THERE wasn't much talk during the meal. Lacey was watching Mrs. Husted while pretending not to, and she was taking an objective interest in him, as if her husband had communicated something to her in silence. She reminded Cort of Annabelle in certain ways—in the light gestures of her hands, in the timbre of her voice. Once Merle Husted remarked, "I've got a full section here, the full six-forty, but the reason you don't see many cows is because I can only graze twenty-five or thirty to a quarter, on this dry range." He sucked up coffee, having done his conversational bit.

If that had been a warning, Lacey ignored it. He rolled and lit a smoke, one ear 'way outside for sounds of pursuit, listening through and beyond the fat humming of insects and the happy gasping of children at play. They were nice people, Lacey reflected, and he appreciated the fact that, though poor, they would not permit dirt to enter their poverty. Pride is an efficient broom.

He finished his cigarette slowly, lulled into a sense of semi-security by the hopeful assumption that the posse would not be likely to search for him at a homestead. Presently he rose and stepped into the sunlight. Merle Husted followed him out, and the man was now wearing a gun.

"You better track." Husted's hand was poised to draw.

Cort Lacey nodded. "I'd planned to. But—" he stared down at the gun—"why the change in hospitality?"

Husted was a blunt man, like most men who combat weather and soil and nature, eternally. He said, "I was down on the Coast about six months ago to get supplies, and I saw a posted description of this Cortland Lacey. If you're he, we might have trouble." Husted's hand was covering his gun butt. "You shouldn't have cleaned yourself up, because then I wouldn't have noticed the resemblance between you and that poster."

It seemed to Lacey that the man was taking a long chance: betting a successful capture and reward against the possibility of wild shots hitting the children, should Lacey elect to fight.

Husted went on, "So if you're not Lacey, track out. If you are, reach. In either case, I'm taking no chances."

There was Lacey's choice, all made for him. It was up to him now, not Husted. That man wanted safety for his family more than he wanted any monetary reward; but his manhood, not his poverty, had had to disclose to Lacey why he was kicking him out.

And Lacey liked it. "Thanks for the meal—and the kind words that preceded it."

"I don't like killers."

Cort Lacey took his horse and swung up. "The difference between killing a man and eating meat is esentially one of degree, not of kind. A steer is big and it bellows when you slaughter it, a mosquito merely stops its buzzing. The mosquito wanted to feed on us, we wanted to feed on the steer. We're all killers."

"Is that your creed?"

Running hoofs disturbed the afternoon silence from beyond Husted's gate. The dog bounded into action.

Lacey swung his bits west toward the opposite fence. "Perhaps Nature resents the power of evil."

Husted was offended. "It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

Cort Lacey rode impulsively to the doorway of the house and reached down a hand to Mrs. Husted. "This had to come to rest someplace, and I would like this to be the place."

He was offering Mrs. Husted the locket and chain.

She hesitated, lips indrawn, eyes on her husband. He stepped toward her, growling something. The running hoofs had faded to silence for a minute, as if they had dipped into a draw; but now they were louder, galloping hard.

Lacey pleaded, "Take it—it isn't stolen!" And he thrust it at her. "Let the kids play with the locket, if you don't choose to wear it."

Husted was standing by Lacey's stirrup. Quick admiration was in his eyes and a sort of understanding had come to him. "I can stall 'em for mebbe twenty minutes. Ride out the west gate. Mother? Start coffee for our visitors." To Cort Lacey he said, "Think you can make it?"

"Sure I can."

But both of them knew that it was a lie. Lacey raked rowels and plunged out through the opposite gate even as he heard Husted calling, "This way, boys! Stop an' have coffee with us!"

Twenty minutes. Less than half an hour to the end of the trail, and the time had been given to him by a man he'd never seen before and wasn't likely to see again. His time was almost run out; it was dwindling into eternity. He should have realized that fact days ago when he'd first seen Treeworgy in the saloon, but he hadn't. He never should have arrogated Treeworgy with scornful eyes and caused the man to run for help.

But—and the thought was bitter in him—maybe he, Cortland Lacey, had had nothing to do with it. Maybe a man's destiny is all rigged and set before he starts, maybe it's all baited like a trap when you're born, and then some unknown comes along and stumbles over the bait and the trap smacks shut and that's the end of you. At least Treeworgy, the jokester, the fawner, the informer, would share a slice of whatever limelight was left to him in whatever nether region he was now, because his actions had led to the death of Cortland Lacey, the famous killer.

Yeah, it was Treeworgy, that bum from the saloon, who gave the alarm. They say he fought Lacey on the trail just west of here, and that Lacey caved in his chest. Uh-huh. . . . Treeworgy? Oh, just a hanger-on, but he must have had some stuff left in him, 'cause he put up a fight, an' he had no gun. Yeah, I knew him well. I remember once in a crap game. . . .

Treeworgy, the town martyr.

Lacey dismounted behind a boulder, assembled the Spencer and cocked it. He

gave his horse a smart whack on the rump and sent it away to what he hoped would be better pastures. The animal might even circle back to Husted's, and Husted was welcome to him. A horse usually returns to the place where it was last given food, anyway.

There were sounds down there—not distinct sounds, but tiny throat noises, ragged whisperings; the creak of a boot and the muted tinkle of a sling swivel. It was the poses creeping around the spot that Lacey's horse had burst from.

CORTLAND LACEY hugged the stock of the Spencer, at long last admitting to himself that his luck had run out. He thought of people, like himself, who live in one room and eat sparingly, since their incomes are too small or too irregular for any marked activity. Their lives would be unbearable if it wasn't for their hopes of good luck and their fears of bad. Children of illusion. . . .

It was too late now for further regrets, or indeed for any regrets at all. Let the posse come—he'll play it as dealt.

His luck had stopped, he knew. I had one stroke of evil when Treeworgy got away from me in the saloon to raise the alarm, and I had one stroke of luck when the circumstance of it being Sunday gave me a day's lead over the posse. But now all luck, wisdom and folly have come to a stop. Even time has stopped, because I have none left. So be it, and good-bye, Annabelle, and please don't think of me at all except perhaps as the swain who took you to that post-bellum ball with a locket and chain in his pocket, but which he never gave you, but gave to another woman instead. But you wouldn't understand that. . . . Or would you?

Lacey was swinging his head back and forth drunkenly. He kept staring over the boulder, his eyes blinking and the moisture gathering in drops on his forehead. Then he jerked upright and a sound wrenched out of him. It was a formless, agonised sound torn raw right out of the black animal depths inside him. He seized the rifle and sprang to his feet and yelled:

"Here!"

He died in the smoke-ruffled air while serving his personal gods—his guns, his fast hands and his quick eyes. A bullet hit with the noise of a stick whipped into mud and he went down, slashed with more bullets; he went down, spun off his feet by the clattering gunfire, staggering down and around until he lay sprawled in the rocks crumpled and limp with his cold cheek pressed tight against the hot breech of the rifle.

A breeze shoved some of the smoke aside and up, so that Lew Petersen's attention was drawn to it. "Looks like his soul floatin' off, don't it? If he had one, I mean."

Clark Kittell was tugging Lacey's body over, off the rifle. "He had one." Then the marshal pointed. "Damn if that isn't a tear in his eye!"

Petersen reached down and recovered the Spencer. "This's mine." He turned it over and over in his gummy hands. "Wonder why he didn't hole-up at Husted's an' hold the family for hostages? Or mebbe he tried to buy his way out with that locket. Did yuh see the kids laughin' with it? An' the way the woman was lookin' at it like she could eat it? She says it wasn't stolen, that it come to her clean."

Kittell shook his head impatiently. "Lacey never bought his way out of anything, and the only thing he stole—except lives—was time. Thing is, he couldn't stop stealing it once he got started, and the world is run by God's clock, not by ours. . . . Some of you come over here and help me pack him onto a horse so's we can take him to some soft ground for burial. Then we'll start for home. We've all got work to do on our land."

"Is that all, Clark?"

"Yes," the marshal said, "that's all." ● ● ●

GUNMAN'S CANYON

All Lyde needed was rest, but they couldn't rest now. . . .

By
ROBERT
L. TRIMNELL

First you spend weeks under the blazing sun, panning the creek for gold. But it's after you've made your strike that you learn just how tough it is to keep both your poke—and your life!

PETE FARNEY bellied out on the jutting cliff, pulling himself along by some wiry bushes that had hooked themselves into the rock. They obscured the view until he was at the edge and his head out over the emptiness. Below was a

sheer fall of four hundred feet to the slope, where it eased off so goats could climb it. About a thousand feet of that. A man would fall four hundred feet without touching anything, and then roll a thousand feet more to the timberline.

"See anythin', Pete?" old Lyde Mawson called from back on the ledge.

"Yeah," Pete grunted.

He could see them now looking like toy soldiers in the distance. Five mounted men riding at a fast trot. Like spidery toy soldiers, but they weren't soldiers. They rode loose and their formation was ragged, bunching sometimes and then falling out to a file as they danced their ponies along a narrow trail. There was no dust because of the rains that were just finished. The varied colors of their dress and of their horses merged at that distance and looked black, against the gleaming brightness of the wildflowers that spread over the lower slopes.

"Five of the devils," he said.

From here he could see their goal. Brioche Pass. A great cleft in the mountain range, some fifteen miles south. Slow riding, but the pass was easy enough that you could ride a horse through. Then they would circle back to Crow Canyon. They had at least thirty-five miles to go.

On a map it would look as though this route, directly across the Green range, was only five or six miles long. That was true enough, but about five of the miles seemed to be straight up.

"You two rested?" Pete called to them. He backed cautiously away from the edge. These bushes growing down into the cracks in the cliffs could have weakened it considerably. He'd seen rocks weighing a couple of tons split by the force of probing roots.

"Rested! In another two hours we'll be rested," Lyde Mawson grumbled.

Pete was back on the ledge with them now. Both Lyde and Jeanne sat against the rock wall, flushed, arms hanging loose at their sides. Lyde had wet a cloth from his canteen and touched it gingerly to his bruised face. He could scarcely see out of one eye, his lips were ballooned, and purple bruises were raising and throbbing over his face and head, though his shaggy gray hair hid many of them. His canvas breeches and wool shirt hid the other bruises. They'd given Lyde an awful beating, Pete thought. Those five men riding on the lower benches had beaten him with their chaps until he talked. They'd swung the chaps with buckle ends down. That's why there were so many cuts on his face.

Jeanne asked, "Can I have a drink now?" and Lyde handed her the canteen. She had tied her soft brown hair up on top of her head, but the string she'd used had not held. Now she retied it, scooping it up off her shoulders and knotting it together while she wrapped the string tightly around the bunch of it. Sunlight was golden on her bare, uplifted arms. Under her coarse denim shirt, her breast lifted with the movement, and for the moment Pete looked down at the toes of his shoes and did not prod them about moving on.

Looking down, he saw that the soles of her shoes were being torn by the sharp-edged rocks. So were the legs of her canvas trousers, except for the knees, which were overlaid with leather. The pants were really Lyde's. He had said, women's fashions or no women's fashions, she'd never cross the Green wearing a skirt. Further, she'd ridden astride for the first time in her life, from her father's farm to the beginning of the high trail, where they'd abandoned the horses. All of that was new to her, and tiring. After six hours out she walked as though her shoes were caked with lead.

"Reckon we better push on," Pete said, quietly, yet sternly. He rose and stood looking down at him. Reluctantly they got up. Lyde grabbed the burro's lead rope. For the moment the three stood there, Pete towering a foot above the old prospector and the girl.

He looked up at the grayness of the summit towering above them. He set off at a hard, angry stride, and they fell in behind.

IT WAS last night that Lyde had come back to the Lazy Two headquarters. Pete was washing up for supper in the wooden tub beside the bunkhouse, stripped to the waist, for it was a warm June evening. He was sloshing water over himself, his levis, and his high-heeled boots. He saw Lyde grinning and immediately he knew. Lyde was trying to hide it, but it stuck out all over his face. Lyde had struck the mother lode.

Lyde had called his howdies to the Lazy Two hands. He wiggled his bushy gray eyebrows to signal something to Pete. Something Pete had already seen in his face. The dinner gong rang then, and most of the Lazy Two hands scampered off to the ranchhouse kitchen.

"Reckon they'll feed me?" Lyde asked.

Pete yelled to the ranchhouse, "Martha, put another quart of water in the soup, we got company."

The other hands were done with their washing and gone, except for Cree Kanet. Kanet was still studiously shaving his swarthy wedge of a face, leaning up close to the mirror hanging over the tubs, and acting like he didn't see Lyde at all. But Kanet knew. He knew that most of Pete's pay was given to old Lyde for grubstake money, and they were full partners on anything Lyde dug into. Kanet knew also that most of the rest of Pete's salary bought feminine pretties for Jeanne Lane, a farm girl down the valley. But Jeanne wasn't what interested Kanet.

Pete asked, "Anythin' out in those hills besides rock, Lyde?"

"Shore. Varmints." He tore off his shirt and plunged into the water, fanning it up over his head and wiry, knot-muscled old shoulders. The two of them splashed in silence until Cree Kanet had quit shaving. They watched him slowly put his straight razor in a leather case, slowly gather up his clothes and wander off into the bunkhouse.

Lyde chuckled, "Now wouldn't he like to know where—"

Pete put a finger to his lips and thumbed toward the bunkhouse window at the end of the tubs. So Lyde didn't say anything until they were in the open yard headed for the kitchen.

"Joe and me found us a crick that's paved with yella stuff," he whispered. "We staked us two claims—two-hunnert-foot claims—which is all the law allows. If we had two more people to stake claims we'd have the best part of the crick. Lissen, how about your girl, Jeanne? She won't have to break her back washin' gravel—jist lay claim and then hire you and me and Joe Wilson to help her."

"Where is the strike?"

"Crow Canyon. Direct across the range. I come across but—she's pure hell for a climb back. We kin ride around through Brioche pass, though. That's easy enough."

They both tried hard to hide the glee on their faces as they went in to dinner.

It was late that evening that Lyde Mawson turned up missing. Pete had been in to see the boss and tell him he was taking off for a few weeks, and maybe for good. If this creek panned well enough he might soon have his own brand. Roundup was over and so Pete didn't feel bad about leaving on short notice.

Back at the bunkhouse, he found sleeping men and three card players crouched around a coal-oil lamp. They hadn't seen Lyde. Cree Kanet wasn't around either, though Pete didn't think of it then. At the wash tubs he had been cautious of Kanet just on general principles. The man was shifty-eyed and sometimes bragged that Texas wouldn't see him again. They considered him a *malo hombre* in Texas, a general hell-raiser who was too tough and ornery for his own good. Cree Kanet was the kind who would brag that way.

Pete searched high and low for Lyde. Then Cooky told him he'd seen some men ride off toward the Brast place, and couldn't figure why anybody would be riding out this evening. That roused Pete's suspicions. The Brast brothers were a shiftless pair ranching on the edge of the Lazy Two place, and the boss had often thought of rooting them out of their shabby, evil-smelling dump in the gullies. Pete took the chance and rode for the Brasts'.

He found the place deserted, but for a shed that sounded like a dog was trying to get out of it. He broke in and found Lyde tied up like a Christmas turkey.

"I told 'em," the oldster muttered, spitting blood. "I told 'em. Havin' your face tore off by chaps studded with chólla and cactus spines ain't worth a damn' mountain of gold, and this ain't no mountain. They're headed for town to buy supplies—"

PETE led them up the trail toward the summit. Here the air was thin, the rock smooth and treacherous, and every time you looked down the mountain, it made you gasp with the way it seemed to lean out over that emptiness below. Besides, they were exhausted. Even Pete, since he hadn't slept last night; Lyde hadn't slept either and had been beaten within an inch of his life. Jeanne was, after all, a girl, and unused to both climbing and the high, thin air.

His rifle was slung on his back. He didn't want to risk both his and Lyde's on the burro. The eight pounds of it felt like a ton, but Lyde couldn't spell him at carrying it and if both guns were on the burro—then if the burro fell or ran off, they were defenseless.

"Once ge get over, there's a flat mesa," Lyde called. "Jeanne kin ride Ol' Gabe a space while we tote the pack."

The girl panted, "No, I can walk as well as you can." But her voice was weary. She was pulling herself along by grasping bushes and protruding rocks, bent almost double.

Seeing her, Pete decided they must stop again. Not that she was unused to hard work. The Lane farm was poor and arid. The land should have been left in virgin sod, but her father, Jess Lane, hadn't the money for good land, so he was scratching a living out of the few inches of soil that coated the rocks. Jeanne had followed the plow and brush harrow, she'd walked all day over the fields with a sack of grain slung from her shoulders, spraying it out thinly from loosened fingers until her arms were ready to drop off.

It galled Pete to think of that. Jess Lane wasn't mistreating her, of course—it was just that she had to help if they were to survive.

But Pete Farney's wife wasn't going to do it. Nossir!

That's why they had gone to the Lane place this morning, hoping that she and her father could come along and stake claims in Crow Canyon before Cree Kanet and the Brasts got there. But Jess Lane had been off to town to buy a new plowshare. So she had agreed to come without him. Each extra claim that they staked would be that much more repayment for the time Lyde had spent searching, and another step toward Pete's ranch.

Suddenly they were at the mesa. It was really a long bench, sloping gently uphill. There was thin grass among the gray rocks, and some flowers just blooming. A month later than where they'd come from.

Jeanne sagged down on a flat rock and buried her face in her hands. Her hair had come loose again and tumbled down over her bare arms. Pete sat down beside her and put his arms around her shoulders. "There's a pot of gold at the end, honey," he whispered to her.

She shook her head wearily and did not look up from the hands braced against her face. Pete gathered her hair up on top, wound it around his hand and looked around for something with which to secure it. She held the string in her hand but that didn't

seem to be enough. At last he saw a whitened bone, looking like a chicken's drumstick bone. Some critter had apparently ridded it of flesh and left it there. He stuck that through the soft moist mass of hair and tied it with the string.

"You look like a cannibal now, honey. They always stick bones in their hair, I've heard."

Lyde laughed, "We sure got you rigged up, Jeannie. We could all of us climb into thet shirt, and call it a nightshirt. And them britches of mine shore look like they'd been through hell and almost didn't get out. Now if thet bone was gold-plated—"

She looked up quickly and snapped, "Dressing up the poor farmer's daughter, is that it? You figure I'll do anythin', anythin', to get to your old strike so's you can make me up with fine clothes and—" She broke off, sobbing.

Pete said, "Honey, you're all tired out. Take it easy."

"Tired out? If you hadn't made me come on this fool trip! You're ashamed of the clothes I wear and—on a dirt-poor farm—you just want to buy clothes and rack them on the handiest girl—" She was weeping now into her hands and shrugging away from Pete's arm.

Pete looked at Lyde for help, and got none. Lyde knew no more about women than he did, and maybe less.

"Honey, I don't care what clothes you wear, it's just—"

"You don't?" she cried. "You don't care what clothes I wear? That's just fine if you don't care!"

Pete hooked an arm under her knees and put the other around her waist. He heaved her up and hurried across and seated her on Ol' Gabe's load. He hauled out Lyde's rifle and a sack of flour. He left the flour on the trail. Ol' Gabe couldn't carry much more than Jeanne's weight. He shouldered the two rifles and yanked the burro into motion. Lyde stumbled along behind.

AS HE tramped on, Pete thought, *maybe Jeanne is right. I'm ashamed of the way her family's got to live.* For her father it was all right; a man's got to take what comes. Jess Lane had been droughted out of a good farm before he settled down on the bench. But a girl, it's shameful to see her in patched dresses. He remembered one day he'd happened on her in town. She was looking into a goods store window. There was a dress mannequin in the window, dressed up in the latest—that bustle thing that women were wearing now, with enough blue silk draped around to roof a chuck wagon. He remembered her eyes when she looked at that dress—like a kid in a candy shop, and no penny.

She couldn't afford even silk thread, let alone a dress like that.

That's why he was always buying her things, he reckoned. Often enough, the wrong things. A pretty little green hat once, but it turned out all her best clothes were blue and you can't wear blue and green together. She'd dyed it blue and then it came out fine, or pretty good, anyhow.

So maybe she was right. He wanted to dress her up nice, and that's why he was so anxious to get to the strike in Crow Canyon before the five riders. He wanted to set up a ranch of his own—fancy duds for himself weren't anything to scratch about—but for Jeanne he wanted a nice house and clothes, and maybe a girl to help her with the house.

"I'm sorry, Pete," she said, reaching ahead and touching his shoulder.

The touch thrilled him. He grinned back at her, "It's a tough pull, honey. Listen, you reckon Jess will boil over when he finds your note?"

"No." She shook her head and the chicken bone in her hair flashed white in the sunlight. "He trusts you and Lyde. But I'm glad he doesn't know about Cree Kanet and the Brasts."

Pete glanced back to see if she herself

was worrying about them. She looked worried now. He said, "Look, there's our two rifles, and then Lyde's pard, Joe. They won't ride into three rifles. Gig Brast is yeller from his number thirteens up. Sam isn't that bad, but those two half-breeds that ride with them—I figure it's those two roundin' out the five—they'll skeedaddle with the first shot."

"Cree Kanet is mean, though," she said.

"Then Cree and Sam are all we've got to worry about."

He told her that, anyway.

Too soon the mesa ended. Jeanne dismounted and they plodded up a trail of broken flint. He saw her wince as she stepped on a sharp, upended piece.

"It's nothing, Pete—nothing. Just a little sting. These shoes will hold out."

But he insisted on stopping. The sole of her shoe was worn almost through, and a narrow slit was red with blood. He cut a flap of leather off one of the brogans he was wearing and slipped that in the shoe. It would crowd her foot, but would protect it from the flint, at any rate.

As they went on pain began to knot up his legs and back. Climbing sure wasn't the same thing as riding a horse. The two rifles dragged like hooks gouged into his shoulders, ripping at the muscles running up to his neck until they wanted to part. He smeared the sweat off his forehead and growled at himself, *Keep moving and set a faster pace than you want—you got to lead them. Lyde's used to this, but they've beat the devil out of him, and besides he's no sprout any more. And Jeanne's a girl.*

He looked up and the crest of the mountains seemed only a few hundred yards away. But they couldn't climb the sheer rock wall. He cut off to a rocky trail that ran along the base of the cliff for a ways. It roamed up to a narrow ledge. There he sidled along with his back to the wall, holding Jeanne's hand with his right, and she Lyde's, and Lyde held onto Ol' Gabe's rope halter.

Pete backed around that wall and found it entered a crevice only a few feet wide. The sunlight was cut out by a cliff that towered overhead. He blinked his eyes. The lids felt heavy and hot in the sudden coolness. He edged around and suddenly was out on a broad cliff.

Ahead stretched a broken yellow plateau, running off many miles to the peaks beyond, and at places seeming to slide off into the horizon. They were over the mountain.

They stood there on the cliff and watched while Lyde pointing off through the broken malpais to a sudden jagged rise of red rock, knifing at the blue of the sky.

"Crow Canyon, that's her. Mebbe two mile as the crow flies." He didn't add that they weren't crows. He mumbled, "I got a awful pain in my laig. It was Gig Brast that thumped me there. Reckon it wasn't chaps he hit me with, it felt so heavy and solid-like."

Pete said quickly, "Lead off, Lyde." He wanted to stop that talk. Jeanne was too weary to stand hearing or thinking about such things.

Lyde picked a trail down the slope. It was so easy, this kicking downhill, though soon it was ripping at a new set of muscles, and Pete knew, from that broad look they'd had of this high country, there would be as much uphill as down before they got there.

And before they were down too far, he saw a dust smoke off to the south. There'd been no rain on this side of the mountain, and the dust stood up thick and yellow out of a canyon. Cree Kanet and the Brasts were on their way.

BY FIVE O'CLOCK they'd been pushing for twelve hours. Jeanne was riding Ol' Gabe. Her mouth was pressed into a tight line, and though she was slumped, her shoulders were stiff as she could hold them. Pete saw her glance back at Old Lyde. She wanted Lyde to ride for a

while, but her shoes were now so torn she could walk only on easy ground. Lyde kept mumbling, "I been ridin' shank's mare thirty, forty year, and I ain't settin' on no burro now. I can walk till hell freezes over and then a couple mile more. It's that Gig Brast, beatin' my laig thataway. If'n I could get my jackknife cocked up under that lantern jaw of hisn—"

He always broke off about what he'd do to Gig Brast, for that wasn't fit for a lady's ears.

They were coming down a rocky incline when Lyde stumbled. His legs just seemed to go to rubber. He didn't cry out, but rolled down hill like a ball, past Jeanne and Ol' Gabe. Pete heard him and whirled, caught Lyde's body as he was about to tumble over a twenty-foot drop into a rocky draw.

He laid Lyde on his back. He was loose as a part-filled sack. Blood seeped from freshly-torn places in his cheeks, and there was a red stripe running down his scalp. It was not cut deep, but bleeding steadily.

Jeanne was already down beside him. She seized up Lyde's wrist and felt his pulse. "He's all right—it feels steady, and I remember the doctor said that's the important thing. I think it's just shock. After being beaten so brutally, there wasn't much endurance left in him."

Pete nodded. All Lyde needed was rest. But they couldn't rest now. There was no time, no time at all. He hurried up to the top of a rock outcropping and saw the dust banner. Not over a mile south. He saw now that Kanet could come up this canyon stretching out below him, but since the two half breeds knew this country, they'd more likely take the other branch, across this rocky table ahead.

He turned back to Jeanne and Lyde. The girl had taken off her shirt, and was tearing it into strips. She did not seem fatigued now, but coolly methodical. She was quite indifferent to the fact that above the waist she wore only a thin white cotton shift.

She said, "You want to go on, Pete. Go ahead. Maybe you can join up with Joe Wilson before they get there. As you can see, Lyde can't go on."

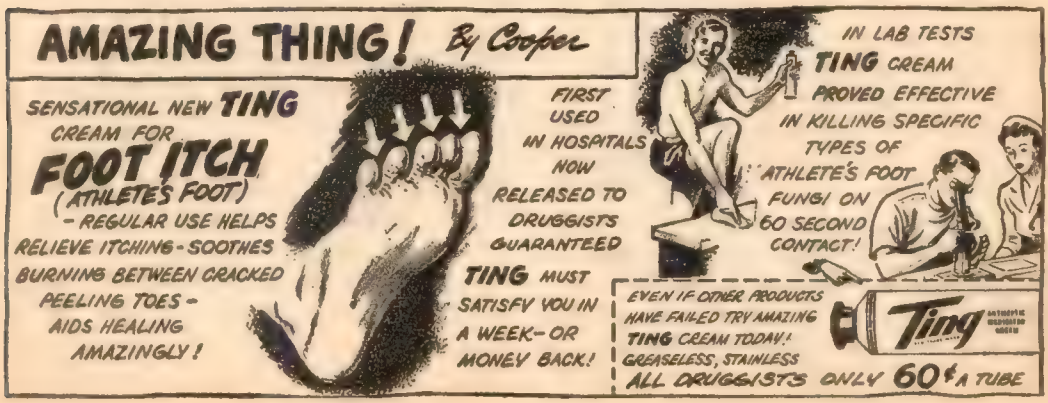
He said, "I've got to—they'll kill Wilson if he's alone."

She turned sharply. "Don't tell me that, Pete. Joe Wilson will skeedaddle for high timber when they show. He's too smart for them to catch. You go and get your gold."

The white shift was patched in many places, and threadbare-thin. Pete thought of that, and of the stream bedded with gold. His mouth tightened. He laid down one of the rifles and said, "Keep down low."

He turned and ran down into the depths of the canyon.

There was no weariness in him now. He was all nerved-up muscle and he ran heedless of danger. He leaped crevices and clambered up over rocks until he was on the far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wall of the canyon and racing across the mesa. He could look down its broad expanse, narrowing to a point stabbing at the steep-walled canyon at the end, through which the riders would come. He saw their dust winding slowly into view. They were to the point of the mesa now, and the dust thinned as they paused. He thought, *if Joe Wilson is well forted up, and I come up over the stream when they aren't ready for it— maybe we can drive them off.* Tonight, he'd go back for Jeanne and Lyde. Tomorrow Lyde would be rarin' to fight, and there would be no question of their breaking in.

The dust banner resumed. It was broken, indefinite now, obscuring the end of the plateau. Then he saw why. It had split into two halves, one coming up the canyon!

He stood, undecided, the rifle in his hands hot with sun-heat, turning this way and that. Some of them going by the short route to Crow Canyon—the others coming up past Jeanne and Lyde. Perhaps they'd seen them descending the slope. They'd be hunting. Hunting Lyde and Jeanne. Those brutes, who had tortured Lyde last night. . . .

He thought of the gold. Of the blue silk dress with the bustle that Jeanne had looked at that day in the store window. Of her worn cotton shift. That could be silk. Gold could buy that. Her roughened hands—he could hire a girl to help her with the house.

His rifle wavered, like a magnet. Maybe they'd pass by without seeing the two on the hillside. They'd be riding in billows of dust. His gun turned toward Crow Canyon. The dust banner there was now separate, two equal banners. Two men there. Three the other way.

He turned and raced back over the path he had just covered.

His weary feet clomped heavily on the ground but the bursting piston of his heart drove them on. He levered a cartridge into the chamber and cocked the rifle. He pictured Cree Kanet's swarthy, hawkish face He fairly flew across the eroded, broken, land. The trip back seemed so much shorter.

He was suddenly at the lip of the canyon, with a rock-strewn slope slanting away beneath him to the bottom.

Directly down was the thick boil of smoke, and three stained riders with uppointed rifles looking warily about. They were close on the spot where he'd left Jeanne and Lyde. He saw a flash of white now that could be her cotton shift. He didn't know if they saw her, or not. He raised his rifle, steadied it with trembling hands, and then fired down into their dust boil.

The recoil of the gun jarred him. He lost his footing and slid down the canyon. He hooked his rifle butt on a rock outcropping, and held there for a second, while rocks clashed away from below him. He heard their fire now, crackling shots, a long sliver of fire weaving along his arm and a rock bursting to fragments before his face.

He lay looking down at them, spread-eagled on the slope.

They had halted and all raised their rifles at him. They were grinning maliciously. In the middle, hawk-faced Cree Kanet spoke and they all fired at once.

But something disturbed their aim. A shot from the far slope. It slammed down as they fired, and Pete knew their shots had all gone wide. He levered his rifle, snapped it to his shoulder and caught Cree's startled face in his sights. Cree Kanet raised his rifle to fire again. There was a crash of shots, from the far slope, from the bottom of the canyon. Smoke puffed out before Pete. He fired again and again. The third recoil jarred him loose from his precarious hold, and he began sliding down with a small avalanche of rocks.

He gouged with his rifle butt at the

(Continued on page 110)

"Hold it right there!" Dave shouted. He whipped his rifle to his shoulder . . .

WOLF HUNT!

By HASCAL GILES

A white wolf is bad luck both for sheepers and cattlemen . . . And especially bad luck for any man—such as Dave Tanner—who is fool enough to hunt him!

BELOW him, Dave Tanner saw the moving glow of a cigarette, and he sidestepped his horse down the rocky bench toward the camp of the wolf hunters. When he was still a hundred feet away from them, he started whistling so they would know he was coming. There

was no campfire, but the men would be awake and alert; and they would be tired and trigger-quick. They had been out here five nights now, losing sleep and getting behind on their chores, and any movement might bring a shot crashing through the darkness. They would be that eager to kill the albino wolf and get back home.

Dave's tune could have had a dual purpose, if he had thought of it in that way. He had good news for the men, and it was worth whistling about. But he was making the sound for his own protection. They hadn't asked Dave to join this hunt, although the wolf had cost him two prime ewes in the past month. The big white animal was on the prowl again, and he knew no favorites. It would have troubled Dave's conscience none if he had let them go on hunting the albino for another five days. But he owed Farley Foster a favor, so he had come in search of them.

As soon as he was near enough to distinguish the shadowy shapes of men and hobbled horses, Dave sensed something was wrong, but it took him a while to find out what it was. There were eight men in the hunting party, all of them cattlemen, and a man who made his living from sheep couldn't be too brusque with them.

Most of them still didn't like the thought of sheep cropping on grass that might be feeding cattle, and it was because of this feeling that they hadn't invited Dave on the hunt. It would be all right with them if the albino killed more of Dave's ewes if it left their steers alone. But Farley Foster was a tolerant, understanding man. He had foresight enough to realize there was graze suitable for cattle and some suitable for sheep, and that the economy of the West needed the strength of varied production.

The men had been in a semi-circle when Dave first saw them, bunched close together like they were looking at something. They heard him coming, and by the time he drew rein a few feet away they had turned around, but his view was still blocked beyond them.

Tom Simmons was the first to speak. He pushed his peaked black hat away from his ruddy brow, and looked at Dave like he had just swallowed something which disagreed with him.

"You lost something around here, feller," Simmons asked, "or was you afraid maybe we might get close enough to that white varmint to take a shot at him? The way you come across the prairie whistling he's probably halfway to Canada by now."

Dave started to laugh away the man's concern and tell him why he had come, but a sudden impulse of caution changed his mind.

"I was looking for Farley Foster," Dave said simply.

Tom Simmons gestured with his arm, so that some of the other men slid away from him, and then he, too, stepped aside.

"Have a look," Simmons said quietly.

A gasp of amazement pursed Dave's lips, and he rose in his stirrups for a better look. Lying on the ground behind the group of men was Farley Foster. He was hatless, his arms crossed woodenly over his belt. A faint breeze stirred the thin gray strands of his hair. He was dead. A damp smudge on his flannel shirt showed where the bullet had entered high in the center of Foster's chest.

"Who killed him?" Dave asked. He kept his voice low because he did not care to show these men his true feelings. Three hours ago Dave had talked with Foster's daughter, Velma. He had promised to bring her father back to the Circle Star before sunrise. He still would take him back, for he felt he could break the news to Velma Foster more gently than anyone else. When you loved someone you wanted to be with them at a time like this.

DAVE glanced over the faces in the crowd again. Farley Foster had enemies among them. Dave wondered if he

might have been indirectly responsible for the rancher's death. He had heard about the heated argument Tom Simmons had started with Foster in town a few months ago. Simmons had said some pretty harsh things after Foster sold Dave Tanner enough Circle Star graze to start a sheep spread.

"You've got the wrong idea, Tanner," Herb Bolling said. The B-in-a-Box man had read the thought in Dave's eyes and wanted to explain.

"It was an accident," Bolling went on. "We've been splitting up to hunt the albino wolf. We all rode out different ways about an hour after dark, and agreed to meet here at midnight. Bill Jackson found Foster's body in the rocks a mile north as he came back to camp. He had been shot somewhere else, and was trying to make it back here. Bill found his horse standing where Foster fell out of the saddle."

"That makes it an accident, huh?" Dave said tonelessly.

"One of us must have shot Foster, but we don't know who," Bolling said. "Every time a bush rattles we throw down at it. We've been pretty jumpy on the trigger, I guess, but we can't stay here all year."

Three of the men had fired their guns during the night: Herb Bolling, Tom Simmons and Lon Shadroe. They had checked on this among themselves, and, when Dave inquired about it, Herb Bolling had an answer ready for him. It was then that Dave stepped out of saddle, and suspicion was alive in his eyes. Two of the men who had fired a gun might have had a reason for killing Farley Foster.

"Seems some of you have been a mite careless," Dave said. "Or maybe one of you was real careful."

Dave Tanner knew he was stepping on sensitive toes, and placing himself in an unhealthy position. But it was worth the risk. He had found only one friend here, and now the man was dead.

"You trying to throw anything my way, feller?" Lon Shadroe had kept silent, but now he took a quick step forward. His dark, slender face telegraphed the dislike and resentment he held for Dave Tanner. Shadroe was young and a bit wild. He drank too much and lost too heavily at poker, and when some of the other Circle Star punchers had begun to imitate his ways, Farley Foster had dismissed him. He was a bad influence.

Lon Shadroe had his fists doubled at his sides, and Dave feared he might have to fight him. But he didn't retreat from the threat.

"What did you shoot at?" Dave asked, meeting Shadroe's narrowed glance.

"A coyote," Shadroe said hotly. "And I got him, too. I saw an animal in the brush and put a slug in it. It's none of your business, Tanner, but if you don't believe it you can ride over to the coulee and take a look at the carcass. But I ain't shedding tears over Farley Foster. He thought he was better'n anybody else. I ain't been able to sign on anywhere since he fired me off the Circle Star."

"He didn't think he was better than me," Dave said evenly.

Tom Simmons was sullen and tight-lipped while he answered Dave's questions. He didn't know what he shot at. He heard a noise and fired. When he looked behind the rock where he thought something had been prowling, he didn't find anything. That was all Simmons had to say, and Dave didn't persist. The man had not moved his eyes off Dave's face since he had arrived. There was more danger of trouble from him than from Lon Shadroe. The young puncher was hot-tempered and mean, but he spoke his thoughts. Simmons was a brooding, calculating man, and, therefore more unpredictable.

The only man in the crowd who seemed to hold no ill will toward Dave was Herb Bolling, and the sheepman was grateful for his cooperation. The B-in-a-Box man shared Dave's grief over Foster's death

more deeply than the others, perhaps. Bolling had been hounded by bad luck most of his life, Dave had learned in the year he had been in this country, and Farley Foster had helped him often. Bolling once had run a general sfore in town, but bad debts and hard times had forced him out at a loss. Afterward, he had filed on a piece of graze south of the Circle Star which had been ignored by others because it held no water. But Farley Foster had allowed Bolling to water at the Circle Star. And two years ago, when a blizzard had wiped out many other small ranchers, Bolling had kept his stock alive on Circle Star hay.

"Your shot's still to come, Bolling," Dave reminded. "What was your target?"

"The albino wolf." A brief smile touched Bolling's soft mouth, and he appeared pleased he could give this answer. Or perhaps he was amused at the surprise which widened Dave Tanner's gray eyes.

"Are you dead sure of that, Bolling?"

"Dead sure. I've had a dozen looks at the critter in the seven-eight years he's been roaming this range, and you don't mistake a thing like that. All-white wolves don't come along every day, you know. Once in twenty years there's an albino in a litter, maybe, and I seen this one plain as I see you. But I shot too fast—missed clean."

Dave Tanner nodded. "I reckon you did, Bolling."

There was anger mixed with the surprise which came into Dave's eyes and stayed while Bolling talked. He became so engrossed in the man's explanation he forgot about the others until he heard the rasp of leather behind him. Dave whirled uneasily, and saw Lon Shadroe had caused the sound. The slender puncher was drawing Dave's rifle from the saddle boot, sniffing at the barrel. Dave relaxed. He had cleaned the gun hours ago.

"Just checking," Shadroe said when he saw Dave watching him. "We don't know how long you've been up there on the bench, and it was a good place for a shot. You still owed Foster money for the land he sold you. That might be one way to cancel a debt."

TOM SIMMONS answered Shadroe before Dave had a chance. The gangling rancher grabbed the rifle from the cowboy's hand and shoved it back into the saddle boot.

"I'm getting sick of this jawing," Simmons said. "Farley got shot accidental, and he's dead and there's nothing none of us can do about it. Tanner wouldn't have the guts to kill a man. Now, I'm for getting back to what we come for. From the whole of us, that albino has run down two hundred head of stock in his time. I can't afford to lose no more to him."

Simmons fixed his eyes on Dave Tanner, and spat angrily into the grass. "I'm sick of you, too, mister. Now get out of here and leave us alone."

"I'll do that," said Dave. "But I reckon I'll have to take Foster's body to the sheriff and talk with him about it. It was no accident, Simmons. Foster was bushwhacked, and I know who did it."

Simmons tried a dry laugh, but it amounted to a sound of irritation. "How would you know anything about it?"

"Like Shadroe pointed out," Dave said. "There's no way of knowing how long I was up there on the bench. You can see a long ways from up there. Maybe I saw somebody kill him."

It had been an effort for Tom Simmons to control his patience, and now it reached an end. He strode around to face Dave Tanner squarely, standing with legs widespread and fists clenched at his sides.

"You can go tell the sheriff anything you want to, because he'll listen to us before he'll listen to one nosy sheeper. But there's one thing sure, Tanner. You ain't taking Farley Foster's body no place. He come out here with us, and we'll take him home

again. I don't aim to stand by and see a good cowman take his last ride with a sheeper!"

Dave hesitated a moment, wondering if he should make an issue of the matter. He had avoided trouble with these men for a long time, partly because of Farley Foster's friendship and partly because of his own unassuming manner in their presence. Dave had planned it that way from the beginning. He had not wanted to antagonize them until he was out of debt, and his spread was supporting itself. By that time the cattlemen would be accustomed to his presence, and his success would speak for itself. Then he would feel free to speak of his love for Velma Foster, and when they were married the situation would be different. Cattlemen opposed nothing so strongly as newness and change, and they scorned all failures. Dave thought of this, and he knew if he retreated this moment in itself would be a failure.

"I'm taking Farley Foster's body in for a talk with the sheriff," Dave repeated.

He took a step forward, and Tom Simmons was there to block him. Simmons grunted a curse, and swung at him. Dave had been watching for the blow, and his left arm flicked up to stop it. Simmons' grimaced face was unprotected for the moment. Dave smashed his right fist into the man's mouth, feeling his knuckles grinding against teeth and the man's bristly black mustache.

Simmons rocked sideways, and then tottered over awkwardly to fall sprawling on one shoulder. He shook his head groggily, rising on hands and knees. He rose slowly, like he was going to stand, but that wasn't what he had in mind. Instead, he turned, still crouched, and dived at Dave's legs. The sheepman fought as he knew Simmons would fight if the chance came. Dave measured the man's dive, and then raised his right foot. The rancher's forehead rammed into the hard sole of the boot, sending a shock along Dave's leg. Dave danced backward a step, shoving himself with the foot braced in Simmons' face. Momentum carried the rancher forward a few feet, but when he fell on the ground he didn't move.

"That's pretty rough fighting," Bill Jackson said from the quiet crowd who had watched the fight. "You had no call to tear his face up that way."

Dave had not expected his methods to bring approval from the crowd, but he felt pressed for time. He was sure of the identity of Farley Foster's killer, but the shred of evidence he had was too flimsy to convince a jury. He needed proof, and he needed it before the killer had time to figure out where he had make his mistake. The thing Dave didn't know was a reason for the killing. But he kept thinking of a wise saying he had heard somewhere about a man always knowing his enemies and never being sure of his friends. He hoped Velma Foster would be able to tell him more.

Dave measured Bill Jackson with a steady gaze, and said, "Maybe you'd like to do something about the way I fight."

Jackson shook his head slowly, and the moment of tension was gone. "We've got nothing against you, Tanner," Herb Bolling said. "I'll help you get Foster's body on your saddle."

LIGHTS still burned in the Circle Star bunkhouse when Dave reached the ranch. Some of the cowhands had been in a poker game, but Dave broke it up when he entered and told the foreman of Farley Foster's death. He relayed the explanation the wolf hunters had given him, saying nothing of the trap he had baited before he left the prairie camp.

The foreman went with him to the house, but it was Dave who tlaked with Velma Foster. She came to the door with her dark hair mussed into a hundred curls around her shoulders, and her trim figure camouflaged in a drab woolen robe that must

have belonged to her father. She had a questioning look in her wide brown eyes. The expression heightened her lively beauty, and Dave was saddened by the necessity of hurting her.

He was still fumbling with a greeting when Velma saw the horse in the yard with Farley Foster's body roped to the saddle. A frightened sob shook her, and she clutched Dave's arm, almost collapsing against him. Dave held her close to him, trying to comfort her while the foreman stood behind him, worrying his hatbrim through his fingers. Afterward, Dave sent Velma back into the house while he and the foreman carried the rancher's body to the leather couch in the parlor.

"The albino wolf," the foreman murmured when they returned to the porch. "I've heard they're a heap of bad luck, and that one sure was."

Dave sent the foreman back to the bunkhouse without any comment on the man's superstition. He found Velma seated in the dark parlor, her face buried in her hands. He did not speak to her until she had overcome the first shock of truth. Then he told her of his suspicions, and was surprised to see the fresh concern come into her face.

"Please, Dave," she said, grasping his hand anxiously. "don't get yourself into trouble. Father's dead, and it won't help any for you to die, too. I—I can't lose you both. Let it be an accident if they want to call it that."

Dave shook his head. "I can't do it, Velma. You can't let a man get by with a thing like this. One day he might decide it would be a good way to get rid of me, too—or even you. I've made my play now, and I've got to follow it."

Velma folded her hands hopelessly in her lap. The smallness and aloneness of her made Dave want to stay with her instead of riding on the wild gamble he had planned. He tried to explain to Velma that it was a task he felt as a responsibility, one he could not risk with Sheriff Frank Dotson. Dotson was honest, but he had been elected by cattlemen. He would want to wait and weigh the information he could get from them. The best time to catch Farley Foster's killer was tonight.

"But it's a dead man's trap, Dave," Velma pleaded. "You can't make a challenge like that and live. If the killer thinks you know him, he won't rest until you're where you can't talk."

Dave hid behind a reassuring smile the tension which had been twanging his nerves since he had made the accusation at the wolf hunters' camp. Velma was right, but Dave had made himself the target of a killer's gun purposefully. When someone came gunning for him, that would be all the proof he needed that Farley Foster's death was no accident.

Dave was on his way out when Velma followed him and asked a favor. "I'd like you to get father's money belt for me, Dave. He'd just sold some cattle in town when Tom Simmons asked him to hunt the albino. The bank was closed, and he didn't trust the money in the safe."

She waited in the doorway while Dave returned to the parlor. Before he ran his hands along the waist of Farley Foster's levis a grim conviction had already settled in Dave's mind. Velma read the worry in his eyes when he came back through the hallway. Dave knew now why Foster had been killed.

"It's gone," Dave said. "How much did he have on him?"

"He sold a hundred head to the army quartermaster. They must have brought between four and five thousand. The deal is always handled through a broker, and father collects in cash."

Dave said, "Not much to kill a man for, but enough if you've never had that kind of money. I'll get it back for you, Velma."

DAVE TANNER rode a wide circle around his cabin on Blackstone Mesa. There was one place you always could be

sure you could kill a man. Sooner or later anyone who ran his own place had to come home.

Daylight was two hours away when Dave found the horse hidden in a patch of scrub cedars a hundred yards behind his lambing pens. So far Dave Tanner had outguessed the man.

It was logical. Hide your horse and then sneak up afoot. Get into the house while you know it's unoccupied, and wait. The sheriff would be hard to find at midnight, and if a man had business with the law it could wait until daylight. But Dave wouldn't be alive at daylight if the killer's strategy worked. A silhouette in a doorway was an easy target for a gunman hiding in a dark room.

The killer was in the cabin now, but Dave's planning had not gone beyond making sure of this fact. He sat for a while considering the tired horse standing in the brush with its reins dragging the dirt. There was no way of knowing how long the animal had been here. It carried no brand, but there would be several people who could identify it. Riding stock was usually associated closely with owners in this country, and certain mounts automatically identified the men who rode them. Dave had no particular curiosity about his observations. He knew who owned the horse. But his rambling thoughts led him eventually to a solution, and he retraced part of his trail.

Leading his horse, Dave entered a dry wash from the south and followed its eroded course until he reached a point fifty yards from his cabin. He had selected a spot where he could watch both the front and rear of the building. Dave took his rifle from the saddle boot, glanced speculatively at the sky, and lay down in the wash to wait. The killer couldn't wait much longer. It would be daylight soon, and his position would be risky. He might be seen leaving the cabin, or someone might discover his horse.

The man pulled out sooner than Dave had expected. False dawn had sent the first cobweb-like streaks of rose and yellow into the eastern horizon, and Dave was fighting an urge to go to sleep where he lay on his belly in the rocky dirt with his eyes at the rim of the wash. He had been that way for more than an hour, tense and alert at first, and then weary, doubting. But the first movement sent a quiver of excitement through him, and Dave squinted his eyes through the gloom to make sure his imagination had not tricked him into seeing something that wasn't there.

Something had moved, all right. Dave saw it again now, a stealthy, hesitant shadow at the rear of the cabin. The man stopped there a moment, probably swinging his eyes over the open ground between him and his hidden horse, and then he strode confidently away. Dave waited until the man was too far advanced to gain the safety of the cabin again, and then he climbed out of the gully. He broke into a run, moving on his toes. Desperation drove Dave to a speed beyond his usual capacity, and he had closed the distance to twenty yards before the killer heard the rustle of grass under booted feet. The man looked over his shoulder suddenly, and Dave was close enough to see the startled fear leap into his face.

"Hold it right there, Bolling!" Dave shouted. He jarred to a halt, whipping the rifle to his shoulder.

Dave stopped just in time. Herb Bolling obeyed the sheepman's command, but as he turned he brought a sixgun in sight with him. Dave squeezed the trigger, and was uncertain for a moment whether or not the rifle had fired. All he heard was the explosion of Bolling's sixgun. A sliver of flame leaped out at him, reflecting against the sweat-slick round face of the rancher. Then Herb Bolling sat down hard in the dirt, clutching his ribs and moaning for breath. Bolling's shot had come just a trifle late.

THE sun was up hot and bright by the time Dave got Herb Bolling into town and had told Sheriff Frank Dotson his story. The bullet had town a ragged gash along Bolling's right side, but the sheriff took a look at the wound and decided a long rest in jail would do it good.

Dotson had just locked Herb Bolling in a cell, when a group of riders stopped outside. Velma Foster pushed the door open and looked about her anxiously. She saw Dave Tanner, and leaned against the wall as if she were out of breath. Dave started to go to her, but Tom Simmons and the other wolf hunters entered at that moment, and he waited.

After paying their respects to Velma Foster at the Circle Star, the men had ridden into town to tell their version of her father's death. Upset by Dave's accusations, they had called off the wolf hunt shortly after he left, and had assumed Bolling went home like the rest of them. Velma had decided to accompany the men to the sheriff's office for another reason—to warn Dotson that Dave Tanner might be in danger.

Dotson fingered the sheaf of bills Dave had taken from Bolling, shaking his head despairingly. "Sometimes a man takes another's charity until he gets to hate him. I reckon every time Bolling saw Farley Foster it reminded him of his own failure. He knew Foster had this money on him, so why take crumbs when you can have a whole cake for a change?"

"Maybe it figgers," Tom Simmons said grudgingly, "but it beats me how that sheeper bluffed Bolling into believing he knew who the killer was."

Dotson chuckled drily. "He wasn't bluffing, Tom. The way Tanner tells me, he knew it was Bolling all the time. You told Tanner you didn't know what you shot at out there, and he believed you. Shadroe said he threw down on a coyote, and that sounded reasonable. But a killer always likes a good alibi, and Bolling made his too good. He said he shot at the albino wolf."

Tom Simmons grunted. "So what? That's what we was there for."

The sheriff turned his grizzled face toward Dave Tanner, allowing him the moment of triumph which might raise the cattlemen's estimate of him.

"When you didn't invite me to help, I was disappointed," Dave said quietly, "so I went hunting myself. I killed the albino yesterday about sunset. That's what I rode out to tell Farley Foster."

Tom Simmons looked steadily at the sheepman for a few seconds, and there was less animosity in his bruised face. He glanced toward the cells at the rear of the jail, and then headed for the door, satisfied.

Over his shoulder, he said: "Too bad they don't pay a bounty on all woves, Dave. They ought to pay double on the two-legged kind."

Dave Tanner followed Simmons into the street. Velma Foster walked with him, and the warmth of her hand on his arm soothed the tiredness that was all through him. No bounty could buy the things he had found today. Velma Foster was at his side, and Tom Simmons had called him by name, addressing him as an equal. A sheepman on this range couldn't ask more. ● ● ●

NINETY-EIGHT PERCENT HE-MAN!

NO POPULAR PHRASE was ever heeded so well as the one that advised the young man to "go west." In the early 1850's the population in California was ninety-eight percent male and two percent female.

B. R.

GOD HELP THE PASSENGERS!

By BESS RITTER

Anybody who wanted to travel west by stagecoach in the 1850s needed two things: cold cash and the ability to take any kind of hardship without wincing or complaining. This sounds like a pretty big order, and was, because the fare one way, for one person, from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe, came to $250.00 Meals were included, but they consisted of nothing more than coffee, bacon, and pretty hard hardtack. Occasionally antelope or buffalo meat were added for variety, if the driver was sufficiently hungry to take a pot-shot at a near-enough animal.

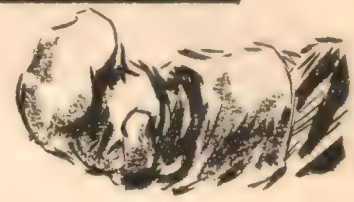
Accommodations inside the coach were as rugged as the food, with three persons squeezed together on each of the two narrow benches. An additional couple sat on the outside with the driver. If there was an emergency, as many as three more folks were packed in, in one way or another. Since overnight stops were unheard of at this time, all the passengers had to sit upright for the complete length of the journey, which took about two weeks if nothing interfered, like an encounter with the Indians or the advent of bad weather. It was even more menacing in the summer than it was in the winter because of hailstorms so ferocious that a man could be killed by the rain of lumps of ice. The cold portion of the year was accompanied by snow, sleet and wind-gales that were extreme in the violence.

And as if all this wasn't enough in itself, the average passenger on the average ride was confronted with the caprices of an occasionally but thoroughly drunken driver, and the insecurity of never knowing when the coach would break down. When that happened, everybody got out and walked until the stage could be dragged to a change-over station. In such a case walking cost the passenger as much as it did to ride, since all fares were collected at the beginning of the journey. But nobody complained for very long, because if they did, the western-hardened driver would start talking about the closeness of the Indians, which frightened the tenderfoots into forgetting about all their other discomforts. Especially when the information turned out to be accurate!

A Black John Adventure

CHEECHAKO TROUBLE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX



It was up to Black John Smith to hunt down a murderer, using his own peculiar technique: Helping the law out when it was convenient, and making his own laws when it wasn't!

CHAPTER ONE

Murder at Elbow Rapids

IT WAS late in the afternoon of the day after Christmas when Black John Smith and Lyme Cushing stepped into the Tivoli Saloon in Dawson to be greeted heartily by the little group of sourdoughs that had foregathered near the end of the bar. Swiftwater Bill eyed the big man with a grin. "Speak of the devil an' up he

pops! We was wonderin' if you'd show up this Christmas, John, but we sure never expected you'd fetch Cush along."

Black John returned the grin. "Hell, it was him that fetched me! Personally, I prefer the peace an' quiet of Halfaday, but Cush got his mind set on the bright lights an' was ra'rin' to go so I give in."

Old Cush, the lugubrious proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that ministered to the wants of the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, scowled. "Huh, it was him that was ra'rin' to go. One mornin' when he come in the saloon an' we was pourin' our drink I says how the squaw that does my cookin' an' cleanin' around the place was aimin' to go way off in the hills somewheres where her folks is goin' to have a big potlatch.

"I know' them damn potlatches is apt to last for two, three weeks, an' I tried to talk her out of it. But I might of know'd

better. A man can't talk no woman outa nothin' once she gits a notion in her head."

"Then John, he starts in about what a hell of a good time we could have down here to Dawson, what with everyone in off'n the cricks an' all, an' how I hadn't been nowheres in a hell of a while, an' what a hell of a lot of work it would be if I had to take care of things without that gal to help—an' he went at it till I kinda seen it that way myself. So, bein' as how no one but me an' John knows the combination of the safe, I give in, an' hired Pot-Gutted John an' One-Armed John to run the place till I got back. John warned 'em if they stole any more'n we figgered they ought to, we'd call a miner's meetin' an' hang 'em higher'n hell."

"Looks like you got here a day late, at that," Burr MacShane said.

"We never got here no day late," Cush replied. "By God, the way John put them seven big dogs of his'n over the trail, you'd thought the devil was after us! We got in yesterday mornin' an' put up at the Fairview Hotel an' rolled into bed. We never woke up till ten, last night. So we got supper over to the Northern Restaurant, an' then we went over to the Pavilion an' danced all night. I'm gittin' old for sech doin's. My feet hurt, an' I couldn't of got no tireder if I'd of stayed to home an' done my work an' the squaw's chores on top of it."

Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs, grinned. "I'm buyin' a drink. Cheer up, Cush, we'll be startin' a stud game pretty quick, an' you can rest up."

AS THE drinks were poured, Moosehide Charlie joined the group. "I was jest talkin' to Constable Peters. Accordin' to him, young Bill Amberdahl's wife found him layin' dead on the portage trail around Elbow Rapids up there on Johnson Crick with a bullet hole in the back of his head. The day before Christmas, Bill went down to Clem Orkey's roadhouse at the mouth of the crick for some supplies, an' when he didn't come home that night she hit down the crick, figgerin' they was probably a bunch in Clem's place an' Bill had got soused. It had snowed durin' the night an' damn if she didn't trip over Bill's corpse layin' there under the snow."

Art Harper, a sourdough who had been in the country longer than any of them, spoke up. "Young Bill ain't the man his dad was, by a damn sight. Old Ben Amberdahl was some man, anyway you look at him. God, I'll never forget the day he cleaned up on them Roosians down at the mouth of Seventymile, on the American side! Ben, he was a cowpuncher that got shanghied in 'Frisco an' woke up aboard a whaler. He deserted at St. Michael an' come on upriver. I come into the country in 'seventy-three, overland from the Mackenzie, an' Ben was snipin' the bars on Fortymile when I got there.

"I rec'lect it was the day before Christmas of 'seventy-four I was mushin' upriver with a sled load of trade goods when I met Ben comin' down hell-bent ridin' an empty sled draw'd by six big Siberian dogs. He'd got soft on a Siwash gal an' they aimed to hit down to Fort Yukon an' get married, come spring, an' he told me the Roosians had kidnapped her.

"A big Roosian name of Ivan had built that log tradin' post at the mouth of Seventymile. There was always three, four Roosians hangin' out there an' they was a damn tough outfit. The Siwashes would fetch in their fur an' Ivan would get 'em drunk, take the fur an' claim he'd paid 'em for it an' then kick them out. An' they'd steal Siwash girls an' run 'em down river an' sell 'em to the whalers.

"There wasn't no law in the country them days, an' Ben was alone. I told him he better not tackle them Roosians singlehanded, but he claimed he wasn't afraid of 'em, an' hit on down-river. I hated to think what would happen to him, so I turned around an' follered him down. It

wasn't only a little ways back, an' when I got there an' was slippin' my rifle out from under the lashin' of my load, I seen Ben shove the door of the tradin' room open. Before I got up the bank there was the damndest volley of shots I ever heard, an' a couple of minutes later when I busted into the room with my rifle cocked, Ben stood there shovin' shells into the cylinder of his forty-four Colt, an' four Roosians laid dead on the floor—three of 'em with guns in their hands! Ivan an' another one was layin' behind the counter an' two was in front of it. Ben, he'd fired five shots. Each one of them four Roosians had a bullet hole in his forehead, an' one bullet had missed an' hit the picture of the Roosian King right between the eyes."

"Did he get the girl?" Camillo Bill asked.

"Sure he did. They had her locked in a back room. He got her out an' loaded her onto his sled an' shoved on down to Fort Yukon an' they got married without waitin' for spring."

"I've heard about that fight in that Roosian tradin' post," Bettles said. "It's the post that Joe Turner runs now."

Several others had heard of it, and Burr MacShane asked. "What became of Ben Amberdahl?"

Art Harper shook his head. "Don't no one seem to know. He ain't been around for years. Made him a stake on Fortymile, I guess, an' went outside."

"I've seen his gun—that Colt forty-four. Joe Turner had it hangin' on his wall. It had Amberdahl's initials carved in the wooden grip."

"That's right," Harper said. "Joe bought the layout from Ivan's Siwash wife, an' later he bought Ben's gun an' hung it on the wall right in under that picture with the bullet hole between the eyes. But it ain't there now—it not the picture neither. I come through there not long ago an' Joe told me someone had stole the gun a year or so back."

"Ain't they got no idea who shot Bill Amberdahl?" Old Bettles wanted to know.

"Accordin' to Peters," Moosehide replied, "along in the forenoon of Christmas he got to Clem Orkey's roadhouse on a reg'lar patrol. They was a bunch in there from up the Klondike an' some of them cricks that runs into it above Bonanza. Clem didn't have no complaints an' neither did the others, an' Peters was about to pull out when Amberdahl's wife come bustin' in claimin' she'd tripped over his corpse, there at the Elbow Rapids, an' he'd been shot in the back of the head. She stayed there with Clem's woman while Peters an' Clem an' a couple of others went up an' fetched Amberdahl down an' histed him up on the meat cache.

"Clem give Peters a list of everyone that was to the roadhouse the day before. There ain't only three claims on Johnson Crick. Amberdahl an' his wife was the first ones to locate on the crick. They filed a claim a year ago last spring a couple of mile above the Elbow Rapids. Couple months later Duff Regan an' his breed wife located a mile further up, an' in the fall a young feller name of Jack Manners located above Regans."

HARPER observed, "Duff Regan must of abandoned his claim on the Kandik. He married Ivan's breed daughter, Sonia, after Ivan got killed, an' they located on the Kandik. Had a pretty good layout there, it looked like."

"Accordin' to what Clem told Peters," Moosehide went on, "Some of the boys was already there when Amberdahl come in about the middle of the forenoon. Duff Regan's wife come in a little later, an' along about noon this here Jack Manners drifted in. Drinks was had an' after while Amberdahl got kinda ugly an' accused Manners of seein' too much of his wife. Manners told him he was a damn fool. Told him that he never was down to Amberdahl's when Amberdahl wasn't there hisself. Claimed it was lonesome up there

on his claim alone an' he'd come down now an' then to play cribbage. Claimed Amberdahl hisself had invited him down, an' so had his wife, an' they'd play cribbage, an' then he'd hit out for home. He told Amberdahl that if he wasn't soused he'd never accused him of seein' his wife.

Clem says that Amberdahl told Manners to stay away from his place from then on—or he'd shoot him. An' Manners got mad, an' told him that two could play that game. Then he turned around an' walked out. Clem said that Amberdahl got his supplies an' pulled out later, an' then some of the others pulled out.

"The way things looked, Peters hit out fer Manners' place to question him, but Manners wasn't there, an' hadn't been since the snow. So he went back to Clem's an' they loaded Amberdahl's corpse on Peters' sled, an' he fetched it here to Dawson, Amberdahl's wife comin' along. An' damn if they didn't meet Manners right here on Front Street! So Peters took him an' Amberdahl's corpse over to headquarters, an' Amberdahl's wife went to the hotel. Peters says Corporal Downey took over there, an' when they searched Manners they found a forty-five revolver on him with an empty shell in the cylinder. Manners claimed he'd shot at a wolf. But they locked him up."

Swiftwater Bill frowned. "Damned if I'll believe Jack Manners shot Amberdahl—leastwise not in the back of the head. I know Manners. He's a cheechako, but he's a damn good kid. Worked for me for a while. Hell, I was talkin' to him last evenin' over to the Fairview Hotel, an' he didn't like a man that had jest pulled off a murder, by a damn sight. Accordin' to what you said there was plenty of others in Orkey's place that could have had it in for Amberdahl. I know him. He don't get soused very often, but when he does he's apt to get mean. An' as for Manners runnin' after his wife—that's all bunk. I know Maybelle Amberdahl—know'd her when she was a kid, down there on the Porcupine. She's a damn fine young woman. Manners told me about stoppin' in at Orkey's place for a couple of drinks, an' then he come on here for the Christmas jamboree."

"A hell of a jamboree he'll have locked in a cell over to headquarters," Moosehide said. "Accordin' to Peters, it looks damn bad for him. An' besides which, that wife of Amberdahl's is a damn good looker. A man couldn't hardly blame this here Manners for makin' a play for her if he got the chance."

Black John grinned. "I fear your ethics are open to question, Moosehide," he said.

"Ethics—hell! I ain't got no ethics—wouldn't know one if I seen it. All I says—it looks damn bad for Manners."

Cush glanced at the clock. "It's goin' on six," he said, "an' I'm goin' to the hotel. I ain't goin' to play stud on no empty stummick. An' neither I ain't goin' to be late for supper an' have to take no leavin's, neither."

"Me an' you both," Black John said, and turned to the others. "We'll be back in an hour or so, an' it ain't no more'n right I should warn you damn gravel hounds, that on Christmas nights us Halfaday Crickers plays 'em high, wide, an' handsome."

CHAPTER TWO

Lady in Distress

AS THEY waited for their order in the dining room of the Fairview Hotel Cush noticed that a good-looking young woman seated at a table across the room kept glancing at Black John. Finishing her meal, she rose and headed for the door, pausing beside the table at which the two were seated. "Pardon me," she said, glancing into the big man's face, "but aren't you Black John Smith?"

"That's right, ma'am. But you have the

best of me. I don't rec'lect ever seein' you before."

The woman's lips smiled, accentuating the look of tragedy in the dark eyes. "You probably haven't seen me since I was a little girl. I have changed—but you haven't. I'm Maybelle Bolton. My father, Sam Bolton has a location on the Porcupine. You and Corporal Downey stopped overnight with us the time you went up to Taylor's Post and arrested that horrible Cronin who murdered Mr. Taylor and robbed the safe, and tried to lay the blame on Tom Keith. Mamie Taylor knew Tom was innocent even though Cronin had used Tom's knife to stab Mr. Taylor to death with, and then left it where the police could find it. Mamie's my best friend. She and Tom are married now, running the post, and they both say that if it hadn't been for you, even Corporal Downey would have believed Tom was guilty."

"Oh, sure," Black John replied. "I rec-'lect Sam Bolton an' you, too. This Mamie Taylor an' Tom Keith are a mighty fine pair of young folks. But Corporal Downey's the one that deserves the credit for solvin' that murder. I ain't connected with the police. I was jest an unofficial observer—jest went along for the ride."

"You could never make Mamie or Tom believe that," the woman told him. "I know most people think you're an outlaw. But they can't make me believe it, because I know Corporal Downey would never have anything to do with an outlaw, except to arrest him."

White teeth flashed behind the black beard. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"My father says you are smart—smarter even than Corporal Downey. And he, too, believes that if it hadn't been for you Tom Keith would have been hanged for Mr. Taylor's murder, and Cronin would have gone scot free. I recognized you the minute you stepped into the room, and I've been trying to get up courage to—to ask you if—if you couldn't help me out."

"Why, sure, mam, I'll do what I can. What's your trouble?"

"I married Bill Amberdahl and we have a location on Johnson Crick a few miles above Clem Orkey's roadhouse. On the day before Christmas Bill went down to Orkey's for some supplies, and when he didn't return that night I went down to find out why, and I—I tripped over Bill's body lying there under the snow on the portage trail around the Elbow Rapids. I hurried on to the post and found Constable Peters there. Clem Orkey told me that Bill had been drinking and had accused young Jack Manners of seeing too much of me. The accusation was perfectly absurd, and Bill would never have made it if he hadn't been drinking.

"They brought Bill's body down to the trading post. He had been shot in the back of the head. Orkey said that when Bill accused Jack, Jack denied it, and called Bill a fool for saying such a thing, and they had words back and forth and finally Bill told him that if he ever showed up at our place again he would shoot him.

"Of course Bill would never have done it, and Jack knew he wouldn't. Bill was drunk, and Jack was mad. But they locked Jack up, and Corporal Downey intends to remove the bullet from Bill's head—and if it's a forty-five I'm afraid Jack will be in a terrible position."

Black John nodded. "Yeah—it would kinda look like that, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would! And I know he never shot Bill. He is a fine young man, and Orkey said he was perfectly sober. Bill would have been sorry when he sobered up—and Jack Manners knew that. He certainly would never have laid for Bill and shot him. There were others in Orkey's that day he had quarreled with at times—maybe one of them shot him, knowing that Jack would be blamed for it.

"I swear to you that there was absolutely nothing in Bill's accusation! I never even saw Jack when Bill wasn't present! You do believe me, don't you? Oh—you must!"

"Why—sure I believe you," the big man said gently, and drawing a well-filled pouch from his pocket, tossed it onto the table. "So you're broke here in Dawson an' need some dust to tide you over till this thing is straightened out, eh? Well, there you are. Take it an' welcome."

"No! No! I don't need any dust! Bill and I did well there on our claim. We have money in the bank here—plenty of money. What I want you to do—if you only will—is to help Corporal Downey—as you did there on the Porcupine. If he removes that bullet, and it should be a forty-five they might even hang Jack Manners. And I know he never killed Bill!"

"How about robbery?" Black John asked. "Did Bill flash a heavy poke there in Orkey's place?"

"Yes, Bill had a well-filled poke with him, and I suppose he did flash it. But he wasn't murdered for his dust. His poke with the dust in it was in his pocket when they brought him down to Orkey's. Whoever shot Bill hated him. The quarrels Bill had from time to time with the prospectors and trappers that frequent Orkey's place were never very serious ones, so I'm wondering if whoever shot Bill did it to avenge some thing that happened years ago. If so, the murderer might kill me, too. I'll never feel safe there on the claim alone until the murderer is caught.

"You see, I hadn't known Bill very long before I married him. I've heard that he was pretty wild, in those days. But since we were married he settled down. He drank now and then—maybe once or twice a year. But he soon sobered up and was always sorry. He was a hard worker and really a perfectly wonderful man."

"Hm-m-m. Well," Black John replied, pocketing the poke, "I'll do what I can. I ain't promisin' anything, though. Policin' is Downey's business—not mine. But in a case like this—if it will make you feel any easier, I'll drop into detachment tomorrow an' see what's goin' on."

"Oh, thank you!" the woman cried, in a voice that was half a sob. "I have every confidence in you!" And, abruptly, she turned and left the room.

CUSH slanted the big man a scowling glance. "I'll be damned if I kin figger out how every good-lookin' woman that comes along picks you out to have confidence in, an' tell their troubles to—when everyone knows your the damndest outlaw in the country!"

Black John grinned. "The reason is undoubtless owin' to the benign an' confidence-inspirin' contour of my features, coupled with the subtle aura of virtue that eminates—"

"If them damn words means anything you better talk 'em to someone that knows what it is!" Cush interrupted. "By God, any woman kin git anything she wants outa you! Hell—tossin' out your poke—a good eighty ounces—jest 'cause she stands there an' claims she's got troubles! If she'd of grabbed up the poke it would served you right. An' damn if I don't wish she had! Like I say, it would served you right—an' mebbe learnt you somethin'. Her claimin' there weren't nothin' goin' on betwixt her an' this here Jack Manners . . . when anyone would know that any young feller would of fell for her—husband, or no husband! An' when some woman likes some young guy which ain't her husband, an' claims he's a fine young man, it's jest too damn bad for the husband. I've had four wives—an', by God, I know what women are like!"

Black John shook his head slowly. "Your viewpoint on women is incontrovertibly pessimistic an'—"

"An' if you say jest one more big word you'll git this here cup right between the eyes!" Cush exclaimed, waving the item mentioned under Big John's nose. "An' what's more—I'm bettin' that if this here Manners gits turned loose, like she wants him to, she'll be makin' a play to marry

one of you two—or mebbe both, before the snow melts on Bill Amberdahl's grave."

Black John's grin broadened. "A man might do worse, at that. Good-lookin' young woman—good location—money in the bank. . . ."

"Yeah—an' hell a-poppin' on Halfaday all the rest of your life! Come on, lets git over to the Tivoli. What with all the folks they is in town we mightn't get no seat in the stud game."

ALONG toward the middle of the following morning, Black John stepped into the office at detachment headquarters and greeted Corporal Downey seated behind his flattop desk. "Well, how's things goin' in the ranks of the sinful?"

"Oh, not too bad for the number of people that's in for the Christmas hell-raisin'. Draw up a chair an' sit down. Town detail keeps busy with drunks, an' fights, an' whatnot. We've got one murder on our hands, though, that don't look so good."

The big man grinned. "Well, takin' 'em by an' large, as the Good Book says, damn few murders do look good to the casual observer."

"What I mean—a fellow by the name of Bill Amberdahl was—"

"Yeah," Black John interrupted, "I've heard the particulars—everything up to how you found a forty-five gun on Manners with one empty shell in the cylinder, an' Manners claimed he'd shot at a wolf."

Downey nodded. "An' on the face of it, it looked bad for Manners. But here's somethin' else—I got the bullet out of Amberdahl's head. He was wearin' a twill parka, an' whoever shot him slipped up behind him on the trail and fired the bullet into his skull, low down. He slipped up damn close, too. There's flecks of burnt powder around the bullet hole in Amberdahl's parka—black powder. The cartridges in Manner's gun were smokeless. I got the bullet where it had plowed through his brain an' stopped against his skull, high up in front, about where the hair starts. It was a soft lead bullet—mushroomed a little, but in pretty good shape.

"I fired a bullet out of the gun we took off Manners into a tub of mud an' took the two bullets over to the hospital where they've got a good microscope, an' it didn't take but a few minutes to see that it couldn't have been fired from Manner's gun. The butt end of the bullet that killed Amberdahl measured a mite smaller than the other—prob'ly a forty-four. The two bullets were a different shape an' weight. The lands an' grooves were different, too. But the thing that mattered most is that the bullet I took from Amberdahl's head was fired from a left hand twist gun, and Manner's gun is a right hand twist. The Colt is the only left hand twist I ever heard of—all the rest are right hand. The lands an' grooves show the twist of the barrel the bullet was fired from. One other thing—the course of the bullet slanted upward, showin' that whoever fired it was shorter than Amberdahl, who measures five-foot-ten. Manners stands six-foot-one in his socks."

"So you turned Manners loose, eh?" Black John asked.

"I'm goin' to in a few minutes. I jest got back from the hospital a half hour ago an' ain't finished my report yet. Manners seems like a nice young fellow—not one that would sneak up an' shoot a man from behind. I'm glad he's in the clear."

Black John filled and lighted his pipe. "So, the case is closed, I guess."

"Closed—hell!" Downey exclaimed. "It won't be closed till the one that murdered Bill Amberdahl is hung!"

"Might be quite a chore to locate the party. Accordin' to what Peters told Moosehide Charlie, there was quite a few in Orkey's place, that day that didn't like Amberdahl none too well. Any one of them might have shot him."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "An' the chances are, one of 'em did. My job is to find that one. I'm hittin' out for the

Johnson Crick country as soon as I turn Manners loose."

"Yup—quite a chore," Black John repeated. "What with them trappers an' prospectors scattered all over hell, an' the new snow like it is, an' the strong cold due anytime. Some of 'em might still be hangin' around Orkey's, but the chances are most of 'em have pulled out."

"Sure, it's goin' to be quite a chore—an' most likely nothin' will come of it. He was shot with a revolver, all right. A rifle would have drove the bullet clean through his head."

BLACK JOHN nodded. "Yeah, an' when whoever done it finds out you're on the job, it won't be long before that revolver is damn well hid, or throw'd away."

"If Orkey or one of the others don't know who owns a Colt revolver the chances are I never will locate the gun. It's prob'ly a hopeless case. But I've got to make a stab at it. It was a grudge killin'—no robbery. Amberdahl's poke with around seventy ounces in it was in his pocket when his wife found him there on the trail." The officer paused and shrugged. "One of them prospectors or trappers done it, all right—but, which one?"

"Damn few trappers or prospectors pack revolvers."

"Manners packed one. An' so do you."

"Yeah, but Manners is a cheechako. Time he's been here a while he'll sell it, or throw it away, or leave it home. Me—how the hell could I keep Halfaday moral without it—what with the disreputable characters that keeps driftin' in on us?"

"Some one besides Manners was packin' one," Downey persisted.

"That's right." Black John shrugged. "An' that one held a grudge that called for murder. Your job is to locate the one that had both the grudge, an' the gun, an' the opportunity to use it."

"Yeah—some job!" Downey exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know," the big man drawled, smiling.

"What do you mean—you don't know?"

"Meanin' I've got a sort of hunch, that's all."

Downey eyed the other narrowly. "An' you'll help me out on this case?"

"You know damn well, Downey, that I never neither help nor hinder the police in their work."

"Yeah, I know. An' I know, too, that there's been plenty of times when, if it hadn't been for you, I'd never have solved a case. How about it—will you? Or, won't you?"

"You rec'lect the time you went down on the Porcupine on that Taylor murder, an' I sort of trailed along, an' how we stopped over night with Sam Bolton? Well, Sam's little girl, Maybelle her name is, is Bill Amberdahl's wife. I was talkin' to her over to the hotel, an' she claims she's afraid that maybe the one that murdered Bill might take it out on her, too. An' she wondered if I wouldn't help find the one that done it, rememberin' that I was along with you that time on the Porcupine. I told her I'd do what I could—but not bein' in the police, it prob'ly wouldn't be much. So, if you don't mind, we'll foller this hunch I've got. But I'm warnin' you, we ain't workin' together. Just what you might say—parallel. You from the police angle, an' me just sort of keepin' my promise to Amberdahl's wife."

Downey grinned. "Okay, John. What's your hunch?"

"This here land an' groove stuff you was tellin' about, s'pose you got holt of a bullet that was fired quite a while back—say twenty years, or so—from the same gun that killed Amberdahl, would that microscope up to the hospital show it was the same gun?"

"It would show whether or not the lands an' grooves were the same. An' it would show whether the gun that fired it was a right, or left hand twist. An', yes—I be-

lieve in this case it would show it was the same gun, because all but one of the lands show clean-cut edges. That one sort of slants down into the groove. You see, a bullet is slightly larger than the diameter of the barrel and the hot lead, forced through the barrel carries the marks not not only of the twist, but of any irregularity in the last inch or so of the barrel. The gun that fired the bullet that killed Amberdahl had one land that had been damaged near the muzzle."

"Okay—let's go."

"Go! Go where?"

"Down to Joe Turner's tradin' post an' roadhouse there at the mouth of Seventymile."

"Joe Turner's!" Seventymile! This murder was committed on Johnson Crick, not Seventymile!"

"That's so, ain't it?" the big man grinned. "An' the rookus started in Clem Orkey's place—not Turner's."

"Sure it did! I'll throw an outfit together, an' we'll hit out for Orkey's."

"If that's where you're headin' we ain't runnin' parallel no more. 'Cause here's where I split off. I'm headin' for Joe Turner's."

"But, hell, man—that's way over in Alaska!"

"Sure it is. An' there's a good trail on the river. Not like wallerin' through the deep snow huntin' up them prospecters an' trappers that was in Orkey's that day."

"But, I've got no authority on the American side!"

"You won't need none. All you need is a dog outfit, a hand saw, a pick an' shovel, an' enough grub for the trip."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Meanin' that we're goin' down to Turner's an' saw a bullet out of a log, an' maybe a couple of more out of the skulls of a couple of dead Roosians. Hell, Downey—ain't that clear enough?"

"Clear as mud," grinned the officer. "I'll have the stuff ready in an hour."

CHAPTER THREE

Time to Kill

THE following day the two stepped into the trading room at Turner's post to be greeted heartily by the proprietor, who grinned at the officer as he cast a sidewise glance at Black John. "Congratulations, Downey! I see you've run the old reprobate down, at last!"

The big man nodded. "Yeah, he run me down, all right. But I outsmarted him. I hit hell-bent for the line, an' when he caught up with me he was in Alaska, without no authority whatever."

All three joined in the laughter, and Turner set out a bottle and three glasses. "Where you two headin'?" he asked as the drinks were poured. "What's on your minds?"

Ignoring the questions, Black John fixed his gaze on the wall behind the counter. "What become of that picture that used to hang there? Used to be one of them forty-four single-action Colt revolvers hangin' under it from a peg drove into the wall."

"Oh, that! Someone stole the gun, a year or so back. An' the picture—it was some old Roosian—it got all blacked up, what with the flies an' smoke, an' all, an' I throw'd it in the stove."

"Accordin' to Art Harper, this used to be a Roosian outfit."

"That's rght. A big Roosian name of Ivan owned it. There was always three, four other Roosians hangin' around here, them days—as ornery a bunch of sidewinders as ever got together. There wasn't no law in the country then. But Ben Amberdahl, he didn't need no law. When they stole his gal an' locked her up in the back room there, Ben come b'ilin' down the river. He—"

"Amberdahl!" Corporal Downey exclaimed. "I knew I'd heard that name before! That fight happened long before I came into the country. Before any police hit the Yukon. But I heard about it years

ago. This Ben Amberdahl must have been some man."

"I'll say he was!" Turner agreed. "They didn't make 'em no better. It was Ben's gun that I had hangin' there on the wall under the picture. I was snipin' the bars on the Kandik, an' when I heard about the fight, I come down an' bought the outfit off'n Ivan's Siwash wife. An' later I bought that Colt forty-four off'n Ben. Claimed he was hittin' outside, an' didn't have no use for it, so I hung it there on the wall."

"So Ben got his gal an' married her, eh?" Black John asked.

"That's right. They had one kid, Bill, his name is. He was a kind of a hell-raiser when he was a youngster. But couple of year ago he married old Sam Bolton's girl over on the Porcupine, an' I heard they'd gone over on the Yukon side, an' was doin' all right."

"He was doin' all right till the day before Christmas," Downey said. "Then someone murdered him—shot him in the back of the head on the trail."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Turner exclaimed. "That's sure too bad. I know Maybelle Amberdahl. She's a fine young woman. Know'd Bill, too."

"That gun of Ben's—when was it stole off'n the wall there?" Black John asked.

"Oh, about a year or so ago. That's when I noticed it was gone. I remember I was gone about a week, down to Nulato, an' when I come back the gun was gone."

"Maybe whoever you left in charge, here, stole it?"

"No, my wife run the place while I was away. There was quite a few in an' out, an' she never noticed the gun was gone, till I come back an' missed it."

Black John nodded, slowly. "Quite a lot of coincidences, eh, Downey? Bill Amberdahl an' his wife locate there on Johnson Crick. A little later, Duff Regan an' his Roosian breed wife, pull stakes an' locate there, too. Just about the same time, Ben Amberdahl's gun disappeared from it's peg there on the wall. Ivan was shot by Ben Amberdahl with that gun the day before Christmas. Bill Amberdahl is shot the day before Christmas. Bill Amberdahl was Ben Amberdahl's son. Sonia Regan is Ivan's daughter."

"By God, I believe you've got it, John!" Corporal Downey cried. "I believe you've hit the nail square on the head! But if she did it, she sure bided her time—avengin' a murder twenty-three years old!"

"Them breeds are patient, Downey. They're canny, too—damn canny. She was in Orkey's roadhouse that mornin', an' heard the row between Amberdahl an' Manners—heard Amberdahl threaten to shoot Manners, an' heard Manners tell him that two could play that game. It looked to her like a perfect setup."

Downey nodded. "An' if we can get hold of some of the bullets Ben Amberdahl fired, that day, an' compare it with the one that killed Bill, we've got an open an' shut case—if we can find the gun in Sonia Regan's possession." He paused and glanced at Turner. "Do you know where those Roosians were buried?"

"Hell, yes! I helped bury 'em. They're out back—an' not more'n two, three foot down. The ground was froze an' we didn't go in very deep."

"An' would you mind if we got that bullet out of the wall—the one that went through the picture. We'll saw out around it, an' put the plug back."

"Go to it," Turner said. "To hell with the plug. I can fit one in place."

"We'll dig up them graves, too," Downey said. "I sure hope them bullets didn't all go plumb through every one of them Roosian's skulls."

"None of 'em did," Turner said. "Every one of 'em had jest one hole in his head—in his forehead, jest above the eyes. An' I sure hope you git the goods on that gal. No one likes her. Hell, even Duff Regan's afraid of her!"

WITH the bullet taken from the wall, and the three from the skulls of the dead Russians in their possession, the two thanked Turner, and headed upriver. In Dawson, the following afternoon, the bullets were taken to the hospital where the microscope showed beyond doubt that they had been fired from the same gun as the bullet that killed Amberdahl.

"Okay," Downey said, as they returned to headquarters. "Tomorrow we'll hit for Johnson Crick. But tell me, John, how in the devil did you figure it was Sonia Regan that knocked Amberdahl off that night at Orkey's?"

"I didn't really figure it. Like I said, it was just a hunch. I was in the Tivoli when Art Harper was tellin' about Ben Amberdahl cleanin' up on them Roosians. He told about Ben Amberdahl's gun bein' stole off'n Joe Turner's wall. Then Moosehide Charlie come in an' spilled what Peters had told him, about Bill Amberdahl gettin' murdered, an' all. An' he mentioned that this Sonia Regan was there in Orkey's when he had the run-in with Manners. Art said that her an' Regan had left a good thing on the Kandik an' settled on Johnson Crick soon after Amberdahl did—so, puttin' two an' two together, I got a hunch, that's all. I sure hope the hunch works out."

Downey grinned. "The hunch has worked out already. It's the gun we want, now. Come on over to the Tivoli. I'll buy a drink."

They joined Burr MacShane and Gordon Bettles at the bar. As the glasses were filled, Duff Regan stepped into the room, and Black John motioned him to join them at the bar.

"Come on up, Duff. Wet your whistle. Downey's buyin' one. I just been askin' the boys here where in hell I can get holt of a thirty-eight revolver. We hung a feller up on Halfaday a while back, an' amongst his estate was eight, ten boxes of thirty-eight ammunition an' I'd sure like to get holt of a gun that would fit 'em. It's a damn shame to waste 'em. But I don't know what else to do."

As Regan filled his glass he shook his head.

"I ain't got no thirty-eight gun. Ain't got no revolver. The woman's got a Colt forty-four. Had it couple of years or so. What the hell she wants with it's more'n I know. She never shoots it. It's one of

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them old fashioned ones that you've got to cock with your thumb. Got some initials carved on the butt. I'd ought to throw the damn thing in the river—the way she looks at me sometimes."

Corporal Downey tossed off his drink. "Well, so long, you birds. Have a good time. I've got to get back to detachment and take care of things."

Shortly thereafter Black John sauntered from the room, and a few minutes later, joined Downey in his office.

The officer greeted him with a grin. "Well, what are we waitin' for? Let's go! But tell me one thing—why the devil did you ask Regan about a thirty-eight? You knew damn well that Amberdahl was shot with a forty-four."

"Sure I did. An' if I'd asked him about a forty-four, he might of got suspicious an' shut up like a clam. Askin' about a thirty-eight, that way, he just never give it a thought."

"If it wasn't for some—er—eccentricities in your makeup, John, you'd make a wonderful policeman."

"Oh, hell, Downey, I'd never make a policeman. A policeman's got to be smart. It takes everything I've got to keep Halfaday moral—while you've got to handle the whole Yukon!"

THEY arrived at the Regan location just on the edge of dark. The door opened to their knock, and Regan's breed wife eyed them sullenly.

"The jig's up, Sonia," Downey said. "You're under arrest for the murder of Bill Amberdahl. We've got evidence enough to hang you, and it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you. Get your things together and let's go."

The woman gasped, and stepped aside as they entered the room. "Yes, I'm keel Amberdahl. Amberdahl papa keel mine papa, long tam ago. W'en I'm lettle girl, I'm say I'm git even—I'm gon' keel Ben Amberdahl. But Ben Amberdahl gone 'way before I kin keel heem. So I'm gon' keel he's boy—git even. I'm keel heem wit his papa gon—de gon dat keel mine papa. So I'm steal hees papa gon off Joe Turner wall. I'm always car' dat gon in mine pack, so's wait for chance to keel Bill Amberdahl. W'en Bill Amberdahl git marry an' com' Johnson Crick, I mak' Duff Regan quit Kandik an' com' here, too. He no want to com'—but I'm mak' heem. He 'fraid of me —'fraid som'tam I'm keel heem."

"What made you pick that day?" Corporal Downey asked.

"I wait for chance. Day befor' Chris'mas, I'm go to Orkey for supply. Bill Amberdahl dere. Git dronk. Git in row wit Manners. Den Manners go out. I'm go pret' queek. I'm wait by de rapids, an' w'en Bill Amberdahl com' 'long, I'm sneak up behine an' shoot heem in de head—lak hee's papa shoot mine papa—day before Chris'mas. I'm got even wit Ben Amberdahl after long tam. Somtam I'm mebbe-so keel Bill Amberdahl woman, too. Git mor' even. How you p'liss know it me keel Amberdahl? Me, I'm t'ink you arres' Manners, 'cause he say he keel heem!"

"We figured it out, all right," Downey said. "We'll pick up the gun, now, an' you get dressed for the trail. We're hittin' for Dawson."

"I git de gon," the woman said and swiftly slipped into the bedroom. Black John loosened the buttons of his shirt, and grasped the butt of his forty-five, and Corporal Downey drew his service revolver, both with their eyes on the bedroom door. The next moment the sound of a shot roared out, and both men rushed to the door, to see the woman collapse on the bed. She had placed the muzzle of the gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger.

"Well," Downey said, eyeing the big man. "It looks like the case is closed. I'm glad it happened this way. Somehow, I'd hate to have to hang a woman—even one like her." ● ● ●

GOOD-BYE, BRIGHT MOUNTAINS!

"What do you say? Th pony for the whiskey. . . ."

By CLARK GRAY

A sharp, ambitious fur-trader like Haynes could pile up his profits by "marrying into" the mountain tribe. But was he sharp enough to "marry *out*" of them again?

HAYNES walked toward the smoke for an hour after leaving the little log cabin on the creekbank. He climbed the first rocky slope of the steeply rising foothills, his breath stretching his lungs, sweat trickling pleasantly down the slick inner surface of his buckskins. Although Haynes was a city man, he savored the exhilaration of exercise now since coming to the mountains.

At the top of the slope he looked back. Far below, the cabin roof lay among green

sycamores like a square of chocolate. Gray Wing sat crosslegged outside the cabin, a doll-sized figure now, her knife flashing as she sliced deer meat for drying into jerky. Haynes could see her twin blue-black braids and the round shine of her knees where she'd hiked up her skirts for greater freedom. He felt the old prick of regret; he stood a moment and memorized her image, something for his old age, something to tell his grandchildren, perhaps.

He shrugged, sighed, turned and moved over the crest of the hill, a big man in a tall felt hat studded with silver conchas, a long-haired man with patched, worn buckskins lacking some fringe. He carried a rifle and a bottle of whisky. In front of him, a green valley dropped away. Down there, the silver smoke ribboned upward from a dozen fires. Thirty or forty dirty-white teepees stood clustered around a spring; and among the teepees moved the Crows, making their secret preparation for the Sun Dance.

"Yes, child," Haynes imagined himself telling his grandchildren. "I lived with the Indians once. Fact is—" And here he'd wink and lower his voice and glance around to see if Belle was listening. "Fact is, I was married to a Crow girl. But you mustn't tell your grandma."

He grunted, shifted his rifle, and swung into a long-legged stride down the rocky hillside. Overhead a hawk circled, beady eyes swiveling. Midsummer flowers dotted the rocks with color; Haynes heard a honeybee drone past, and the scent of curing grass lifted about him, yeasty and heady after the mugginess of the creek. It was a country that spiked a man's blood, a country hard to leave, and that was the trouble, Haynes thought. He stopped again, just breathing its sweetness, just savoring it for the last time.

DOWN in the valley, the Crows had seen him. A feathered head tipped back; a coffee-brown arm pointed. An Indian leaped astraddle a pony and came galloping toward him, feathers rippling, naked chest agleam like rusty steel in the early sunlight. Haynes cradled his rifle in his elbow and waited.

His nostrils twitched a little; he needed a smoke. But he'd been out of tobacco for weeks now. He shoved back his hat with the butt of the whiskey bottle, then clenched it behind him.

The rider was laboring uphill, his sure-footed little pony threading expertly among the boulders. Haynes grinned as Standing Horse reined up before him and dismounted.

"How!" Standing Horse said.

He was a stocky young Crow of about twenty, dressed in buckskin breeches and his ceremonial headdress. He'd been painting; a smear of hastily-removed blue grease discolored one cheekbone. He was the son of the sub-chief, and Gray Wing's brother, and therefore Jim Haynes brother-in-law. He was sober and unsmiling, even for an Indian. Haynes suspected Standing Horse didn't like him much.

Haynes said, "How! My brothers paint for the dance?" He spoke the Crow dialect easily now; its ceremonial patterns, its concreteness, its beauty appealed to some inner simplicity in Haynes.

Standing Horse nodded gravely: "You come no closer. White men spoil our medicine."

"All right." Jim Haynes smiled and shrugged. "I only want to talk, brother. I need a pony."

"A pony?" Standing Horse said. "Why?"

Jim Haynes didn't answer immediately. He dropped his gaze and studied the teepees in the valley. From somewhere down there, a few experimental tom-tom notes lifted hollowly. An Indian dog howled. It was from this collection of teepees that Haynes had brought Gray Wing, eight months ago. He'd selected her cold-bloodedly from a half dozen young girls of the clan, because she was pretty,

strong, a hard worker, and because she was a sub-chief's daughter. Haynes had given the old man his stallion and a pack-load of traders' trinkets for her.

Haynes said quietly, "I want to carry my furs to the trader at Fort Benton."

Standing Horse probed him with black suspicious eyes in a stony face. Haynes remembered now that this youngster had opposed his marriage to Gray Wing. But the old man hadn't listened; the old man had wanted the trade goods.

Standing Horse said, "Brother, if you go to Benton—will you come back?"

"Come back?" Haynes said. "Why wouldn't I?" He scowled. This was the danger point; Haynes saw that the young Indian guessed the truth. Deliberately he roughened his voice. "Standing Horse, I do not like my brother's thoughts."

Standing Horse said soberly, "I traded my furs in Fort Benton two weeks ago. I talked to the traders there. A steamboat is coming, they say. I believe your heart is in the steamboat, brother."

"My heart is in many places. Here, and in the white cities of my youth. And in the steamboat. The steamboat will carry my pelts to St. Louis."

The corners of Standing Horse's mouth tilted downward. His eyes shifted over Haynes' face, and for a time he was silent. A feathery breeze stirred Haynes' long hair.

"Brother," Standing Horse said at last. "You came here from Fort Benton eight moons ago, a stranger to us. You had a horse, trade goods, and traps. You married my sister. Why?"

Haynes did not like the question. If he hadn't needed a horse so badly, he'd have turned on his heel and stalked away. Instead, he shrugged and managed a cynical grin. "Why do you think?"

Standing Horse's black eyes watched him coldly. "I do not think. I listen for your answer."

"All right," Haynes said. He opened his mouth, and the lie stuck in his throat. "All right. I loved her."

He felt his own warm flush, and he knew it wouldn't go. The facts were obvious even to an Indian. Haynes had married Gray Wing because he needed a good winter's trap. The Crows were generally unfriendly to white trappers, encouraging them to move on, sometimes by means none too gentle; stolen horses and furs, often a warning arrow out of darkness. But Haynes had married a sub-chief's daughter and forced a wary welcome. The result was three thousand dollars worth of beaver in his cabin. He said drily, "You don't believe me, brother?"

To his surprise, Standing Horse tipped his chin and studied Haynes now with an odd friendliness. "I do not know. My sister is happy in your cabin. If you did not love her, would she be happy?"

Haynes said quickly, "Then you'll loan me the pony?"

Standing Horse shook his head. "The trader from Benton will come to us after the Sun Dance. You can sell your furs then. Why make the trip, brother?"

HAYNES felt sweat form humidly on the back of his neck, under the long hair. He gripped the whiskey bottle behind him and commanded himself not to swear, not to show any emotion at all. It'd be a devil of a note, he thought, to miss the steamboat for lack of a horse.

He grinned wryly, pretending great patience. "I have many friends at Benton, Standing Horse. I worked five years for Simon Forsythe, the owner of the fur company. Is it bad to visit my friends?"

Standing Horse said, "Brother," and his black eyes bored into Haynes' with that odd, friendly intensity. "I have known other white men. They come to Crow land and marry Crow women and trap Crow beaver. When they are rich, they ride the steamboat back to the white man's towns. I have seen Crow women returning in

shame to the teepees of their fathers."

"Have you?" Haynes said, and he frowned; and because he was an imaginative man, against his will he projected a picture in his mind. It was a picture of Gray Wing, walking slowly with bowed head toward her father's teepee, her long braids slashed in mourning. It was a picture that'd soon be fact, and it jabbed like a fishhook in his flesh.

He had told himself that marriage to an Indian woman didn't count. And he could still believe that, abstractly. But there was nothing abstract about Gray Wing. She'd mended his buckskins with tiny stitches of sinew and rawhide thread. She'd cheerfully scraped his beaver hides till her fingers were raw. Once, last winter, when he'd sprained his ankle, she'd even run his trap-lines for him, floundering through waist-deep snow with her ebony eyes shining in happiness at his gratitude.

Haynes said, "Brother, the pony—"

Standing Horse eyed him with grave certainty. "You like life with the Crows. It is good in your heart."

Haynes shrugged wearily. He couldn't even try to hide the truth of that. His happiness these past eight months had been a surprise bonus. He had come to the mountains to earn money to buy a house. As a proper St. Louis fur merchant, engaged to a society girl, Haynes had felt he'd need more money than his salary afforded. A good winter's trap among the Crows was the quickest way to get it. That was Haynes' stated reason. But Belle had seen something in him, Haynes guessed, that he hadn't seen himself.

"It's not money," Belle had said, tossing her yellow hair. "Papa's got money enough for both of us, and a million or so to spare. And it's not your pride. Jim, you want a fling."

Haynes had kissed her to shut her mouth. During those last months in St. Louis, he'd practiced diligently the part he'd play the rest of his life, the brilliant young executive who'd risen in the fur company to marry the boss's daughter. He'd taken Belle to a cotillion, squired her to a charity bazaar, even spent two weeks on a chartered steamboat party with her, a champagne and orchestra affair complete with moonlit nights, chaperones and mosquitoes. But all the time, his thoughts were on the mountains.

Haynes was sorry now he'd ever left St. Louis on this crazy trapping trip. It was as Belle had said, a form of rebellion, a fling. And it had backfired almost from the start.

At Benton he'd hunted up an old company employee, a grizzled trapper who'd spent his best years in Simon Forsythe's service. The old man was a flunky around the post now; Haynes flattered him with an appeal for advice.

"Child," the old man had said, knuckling his white hair with arthritic fingers. "This coon's skinned beaver from the Arkansas to the Columbia. Now, hark my words. You go down to the Musselshell. You buy you a Crow wife, a chief's daughter if you can. Ain't nothin' like an Injun wife to set a trapper solid with the Redskins. You'll find beaver thick as fleas, and—" The old man winked and nudged Haynes' ribs with a stubby pipestem. "—a fat squaw comes handy of a winter's night."

Haynes had said, flushing a little, "I'm engaged to Belle Forsythe. I don't—"

"Listen," the old man said. "How you think old Simon got his start? I know'd him when he had a squaw in every holler. And even then, he couldn't keep the varmits picked outen his hair." The old trapper cackled. He poked Haynes again with his pipe. Then he sobered, and his eyes focused on something distant.

"But don't stay too long, child. The country gets claws in you."

NOW Haynes slipped his lower lip between his teeth and chewed it and looked at the pony. The pony stood with

head lowered, reins in Standing Horse's fist. It was the small Indian breed. Perhaps seven hundred pounds, Haynes judged. Something of a hammerhead, but it'd have bottom and spirit, because Standing Horse prized his horses and kept only racers or trick animals. It carried no saddle; a blanket draped over its back was cinched down by a surcingle.

Haynes said, "Brother, I need a pony. Look."

He did then what he hadn't wanted. He pulled the whiskey bottle from behind his back.

The young Indian's black eyes widened at sight of the bottle. He poked a finger forward, touched the smooth glass, then jerked his hand back as if the bottle burned. He wet his lips. His face muscles knotted; he shook his head; he looked like a carved oak statue.

He said contemptuously, "Trader!"

Haynes clenched his jaws and thrust the bottle behind him again.

"All right. Call me a trader. Do you want the whiskey?"

Standing Horse gripped the pony's reins till his fingernails whitened. He nodded with haggard eyes. "You know I do. You should not have done this, brother."

"Maybe not," Haynes said grimly. "But I did. What do you say? The pony for the whiskey."

Standing Horse rubbed a shaking, sweatly palm across his buckskin breeches, and this was enough for Haynes. He knew that he had won, and the cheapness of it sickened him. He'd brought this one bottle of whiskey into the Musselshell for medicinal uses. But throughout the Winter and Spring, he'd never uncorked it. He'd not needed it. The life itself was stimulant enough. He scowled and waited, while sweat broke out in a glistening sheen on Standing Horse's forehead. The young Crow sighed and shook his head.

"Not the pony, brother. No. But wait." Standing Horse dug hurriedly into his breeches pocket and came up with a string of cheap, red and blue glass beads. He extended the beads on unsteady fingers.

"I gave three beaver for these. A gift for my sister. You take them for the bottle."

Jim Haynes smiled savagely. He knew that the beads cost the fur company less than a dollar. "Now who's a trader? No!"

"I have hoop iron," Standing Horse said. "A frying pan. A bundle of red cloth. All that for the bottle."

Jim Haynes said, "No!"

Standing Horse's face broke into sweaty grooves. His lips moved soundlessly. Then suddenly he thrust the pony's reins at Haynes.

"Give me the bottle. Quickly."

HAYNES angled the pony downhill, avoiding his log cabin by a mile. He'd cached his traps last Spring on one of the Musselshell's little tributaries. He hadn't wanted to bring them to the cabin; that had seemed too final. But now he could wait no longer.

He rode through aspen and sycamore. Wild plums gleamed ripely in the bushes toward the creek; a bluejay flapped away and screamed at him from a treetop. A rabbit jumped from under a fallen log and hopped off with his white flag bobbing. A beaver's flat tail slapped the water somewhere ahead, and beneath Haynes, the little pony swelled his barrel and gave a contented snort.

He would leave tonight, Haynes decided. In a week, he'd be in Benton. He'd sell his furs, and when the steamboat came, he'd begin his long downriver journey to St. Louis. In two months he'd be wearing a stiff collar and black coat, standing up with Belle before a preacher.

Haynes rubbed his jaw with the flat of his hand and pushed the pony through a clump of buckbrush, admitting finally with reluctance that his mountain winter had changed him. The country and his Indian wife had indeed gotten their claws in him.

Civilization seemed suddenly a shabby, shallow thing to Haynes. He told himself grimly that this would pass. A winter in the wilderness had not altered his values that much. Money was still money. And Belle Forsythe was still beautiful and proud.

Nevertheless, his unruly imagination kept swinging to Gray Wing, and Haynes acknowledged now a deep, shamed affection for her. He had never dreamed he'd feel anything close to love for an Indian woman, yet now the thought of deserting her cut Haynes deeply. But he knew he would do nothing else, could do nothing else.

He found his traps where he had left them and loaded them on the pony, tying them to the surcingle. At last, because he could put it off no longer, he returned to his cabin.

Gray Wing stood in the doorway as he wound up to the cabin from the creek. Her eyes followed him as he got a stake from the kindling pile and tied the pony's reins to the stake and drove it into the soft earth with his axe. Finished with this, Haynes rose and went to her.

"My husband," Gray Wing said. She tipped her head to smile at him. She was pretty, and her smile gnawed Haynes' conscience. Her blue-black hair in its long, neat braids touched her waist. She was dressed in buckskin blouse and skirt; she wore blue stone earrings. Haynes had given her those when he took her from her father's teepee. She was clean, and she loved him, and Haynes' heart turned over as he watched her eyes.

"You have my brother's pony?"

"Yes." Haynes brushed past her. In the far corner of the cabin lay his beaver pelts, scraped and flattened and tied into two heavy bundles with rawhide ropes.

"You go to Benton?"

"Yes," Haynes said. "To sell the furs."

She dropped her eyes. Gathering her skirts, she moved submissively aside, unblocking the door for him. Haynes moved halfway across the cabin with the furs in his arms. Then he stopped to look at her, and an impulse formed in him to speak.

"Gray Wing—"

"Yes?"

Haynes looked at her with half-framed questions in his mind. Suddenly, and very oddly, he wanted to ask her why blood made a difference. Why he couldn't stay here always. Why civilization enslaved a man and beckoned him even from a garden paradise. But he asked her nothing like this, for he knew that she would not even understand his questions. Instead, he said gently, "What do you want from Benton?"

She smiled. "A kettle. A black kettle. And vermilion face paint. And two needles. A big one, and a little one."

Haynes nodded. "I'll bring them." He stepped out of the cabin.

OUTSIDE he stopped short and said in English, "Oh, hell!" and dropped the bundle of furs. A dozen paces away, the pony had the stake between its teeth.

Haynes lunged at the pony, hearing Gray Wing's sharp, surprised exclamation behind him. But he was too late. With a vicious shake of its head, the animal yanked the stake from the soft ground and wheeled and galloped away uphill, back toward the Crow encampment, Haynes' traps flapping wildly about its belly.

Haynes stood watching it, rubbing his neck and swearing. Then he swung back toward the cabin. Gray Wing stood in the doorway, a rawhide lariat coiled around her arm.

"You can catch it," she said. She was smiling.

Haynes said, "Gray Wing—" and then suddenly he grinned. He strode quickly to her and dropped a hand to her shoulder. "Gray Wing, that horse was trained to pull stakes. Wasn't it?"

Deep bubbling humor lay in her black eyes. "Many Crow horses are stolen by the Sioux. When a stolen horse pulls his

(Continued on page 111)

"Just a minute, cowboy. If you found something, we're entitle to know about it."

THE OT

No brother of a beautiful girl like Cas, Dawson was positive. And yet . . . just ho.

WITH his hand on the doorknob, Gil Dawson paused for a last look at the man sitting on the bunk in the near cell, his face hidden in his hands. It was never pleasant to see a man crack up; but this time, the first in the five years that had made him the tophand trouble-shooter for the express company, Gil Dawson himself hated to believe the evidence he had unearthed.

He closed the door softly and turned, watching the local sheriff, Winstel, make a slow, aimless turn ar
old lawman's eyes were clo
of his face sagging under his
thoughts.

"It's hard to believe," Winstel said in a hushed voice. "I knew Larry was wild. He played hard, but he worked hard, too."

"And committed murder the same way," Gil said grimly, thinking of the driver who had been shot down from the brush. "You can't justify a thing like that, Winstel."

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ıen feeling lay inside of him.
. the rest of the loot was located, he would be riding out of this town, and there was neither pleasure nor satisfaction in the prospect.

He was staring blindly at the few lines he had written when the jangle of spurs roused him and he looked up, momentarily frozen at sight of her. Casey Bryan was a trimly built girl, her snug-fitting levis accentuating a slender waist and the rolled-up sleeves of her plaid shirt revealing arms

GIL looked down at the desk and for a brief moment thought of Arlo Ness, of the way the rancher's dark eyes took possession of Casey Bryan. His lips tightened grimly.

"He wasn't fighting."

"Then turn him loose!" Casey's little fist slammed into the desk again. "You had no right to lock him up the first place. Your job in this country is to get that blasted stage robber, and you'd better stick to that!"

"Miss—"

Gil lifted one hand in a gesture that was

unconsciously pleading. Then, turned suddenly rough by an emotion strange to him, he yanked open the top drawer, pulled out a thin sheaf of bills and tossed them on the desk in front of her.

"Where'd that come from?" she asked, a challenge in her voice.

"Out of your brother's pocket."

"His pocket!" Casey looked at the money again, incredulously. "Where in the world did he get that much money?"

"That," said Gil, tight-lipped, "is an awful good question. It's part of the stuff taken in that robbery."

"But how did Larry get it?"

Gil pulled in a determined breath, but he couldn't speak. A painful embarrassment was working its way up in him, and he could only watch as her eyes widened under his bleak stare, darkening with the horror of comprehension.

"You— You think he stole it?" she gasped. *"Larry?"*

The utter disbelief in her voice jarred Gil, but he forced himself to go on, trying to be impersonal when he was strung as tight as a fiddle string.

"He got loaded last night, miss, and passed one of these bills at the Last Chance. I've been watching for 'em."

"But that doesn't explain where he got them," she protested. "Didn't he say?"

"No, ma'am. He—couldn't say."

"But, Mr. Dawson—" Casey lifted one hand in bewildered anxiety. "There's some mistake. Larry couldn't have robbed that stage."

"Where was he that day, ma'am?"

"Why, I—I don't know."

"And neither does anybody else."

Gil put the money away and shut the drawer with an angry push, thinking of the man he had jailed. Larry Bryan was probably two or three years older than Casey, enough older so that he should have been taking care of her instead of breaking her heart into little pieces.

"He was ridin' alone that day, ma'am. Checkin' for strays, he said, but he admits he didn't come in with any cattle. And he was ridin' that big sorrel colt that he's tryin' to break from stoppin' on his front feet." Gil paused, then shrugged. "The signs showed that the man who did the job was ridin' a big horse, shod in back, barefooted in front."

"That—doesn't prove anything," Casey said with an effort. "He isn't the only man who works his broncs that way."

"But he *is* the only one who's passin' out bills with the right numbers. I'm sorry, Miss Bryan, but it's—"

He broke off as he saw the anger bounce back into her eyes, seeming to leap up like a flame in the breeze. For just a moment her lips were pressed firmly together while her square little chin came out belligerently. Then she planted both fists on the desk and leaned forward, looking right straight up at him.

"Got it all figured out, haven't you?" she said acidly. "Got it all cut and dried and ready to pack away for the winter. Well, you listen to me, you bow-legged Pinkerton! You may know an awful lot about tracks and broncs and money and stage coaches, but you don't know *anything* about my brother Larry! He wouldn't steal the whisper out of a haunted house, even if he needed it to holler for help. There isn't a crooked bone in his body nor a sneakin' idea in his head; and if you think you can stick him on a deal like this, then you'll have to think again!"

"Miss, I'm not tryin' to stick—"

"And another thing!" She paused, glaring at him until he gave up and let his breath out. "If there was any blood in the Bryan family that would allow 'em to commit murder, I'd be poppin' away at you right now. You dim-witted badge-toter! Maybe Larry *could* have done the job according to your facts and figgers, but he *didn't*—and that's all there is to it. Now roll that up in a cigarette and strangle on it while I go find out what happened!"

Before the echo of her voice had died out of the room, Casey Bryan, like the first strong gust of wind preceding a rain storm, rounded the desk and headed for the door leading to the cells. For perhaps ten seconds Gil stood anchored, staring at the spot where she had been, his skin prickling under the lash of her scorn. Then he slapped his hat onto his head, pulled it down hard over his eyes and turned to follow her.

CASEY had flung the door wide open and Gil slowed as he neared it, sauntering up to tip one shoulder against the casing. The scene before him was not a new one, but never before had its poignancy struck him so hard. The girl on the outside of the cell, gripping the bars so hard her knuckles turned white. The man on the inside looking down at her, his blue eyes showing a mixture of glad welcome and uncertainty.

"I was wondering—" he began.

"Larry, where did you get that money?"

Larry sucked in a deep breath and held it, looking down at the floor and running a hand wearily through his rumpled black hair. "I don't know," he said, with stark simplicity. "They said it was in the pocket of my jacket, but I'll be damned if I know how it got there."

"Who were you drinking with?"

"I don't know that."

These were the same answers Gil had heard before; but they were spoken more definitely, more calmly, as if the man had given up his frantic effort to remember and had decided beyond hope that the memory wasn't there.

"Did you have your jacket on all evening long?"

"No. I took it off while I played a game of pool with Arlo, hung it over a chair. Casey—" Larry lifted his head to meet her gaze, his face puckered. "They said I was drunk and I guess I must have been, but I—can't—remember gettin' that way! I was workin' on a glass of beer while I shot that game of pool, and I can vaguely remmber bein' at the bar afterward but—"

He shook his head, his frown deepening to an expression of pain. Then, with a dismal sigh, he looked back at the floor; and Gil Dawson felt a chill move up between his shoulder blades. He had heard this before, too, but somehow it was sounding different. Larry Bryan wasn't talking to a couple of skeptical, cold-eyed peace officers now. He was talking right straight down into the trusting blue eyes of his sister, and Gil wondered how any man could do that—and lie.

"Where," Casey demanded, "was that glass of beer sitting while you played?"

"On a table, there in the back room."

"Somebody doped it."

"I've thought of that," Larry admitted, "'cause I'm all fouled up. I can't remember anything, Casey. I can't even remember finishing that game!"

"That's it!" Casey's voice was taking on a breathless eagerness. "Whoever put that money in your pocket put something in your glass that made you act drunk when you weren't. Who all was there, Larry?"

"Everybody. The place was jammed."

"Well, I'll find out who did that—"

"How?" Larry's eyes were suddenly glittering with suppressed savagery. "Apparently nobody saw him do it, and it's a cinch he's not going to admit it. He got scared, whoever he is, when Dawson showed up; and he looked around for a sucker to hang for him. I'm it!"

"No! Larry, there's got to be some way—"

"I don't see it," he said bluntly, "and I've sure been lookin'. The way it stands now that jigger's in the clear, and you can bet your bottom dollar he'll walk the straight and narrow from here on!"

"But they can't keep you in jail for something you didn't do!"

"They won't keep me in jail," he said, his jaw hard. "Not for very long."

"Larry, don't say that! They can't—wouldn't—"

The naked fear in her voice struck the breath out of Gil and he watched, taut, as Larry reached through the bars to curl long brown fingers around his sister's arm.

"Take it easy, honey," he said gently. "Reckon I shouldn't have said so much, but—well, seems like we might as well start gettin' used to the idea. I'm stuck, Casey."

GIL DAWSON got away from there, striding rapidly. Nor did he slow his driven pace until he put his horse through the wide sandy wash and came to the spot where *someone* had stepped out of the brush with a blazing gun. Here he swung off, standing a moment in irresolute, irritable thought. He had been over the ground before, thoroughly. He had no hope of finding anything now that would turn the finger of suspicion away from Larry Bryan, but he had to look.

Slowly he moved over the area, minutely scanning the dust of the road, the dry grass beside it, the brush in which the bandit had hidden his horse. He was circling back toward his own horse when, at the very edge of the brush, he saw the dull gleam of metal through the dusty twigs at his feet. Swiftly he knelt, dug out a nickel concha with a broken leather thong. He held it loosely in his hand, staring at it while his thoughts whipped back to the leather chaps they had stripped off their limber-legged prisoner last night. Chaps with one scalloped concha missing....

Gil didn't hear the horses coming until they were almost beside him, and he spun to his feet, instantly closing his fist around the damning thing it held. Casey's chin was once more squared belligerently, her eyes revealing a grim determination that Gil couldn't take. He looked at her companion, Arlo Ness, with an antagonism that stemmed directly and abruptly from the infuriating helplessness of his position.

"Well?" he demanded harshly. "This the best place you can think of to take a girl for a ride?"

Ness' eyes flashed with a quick resentment. "Any law against it?" he snapped.

"I asked him to come with me," Casey said quickly. "I thought—" "

"She thought," Ness interposed in a maddening drawl, "that maybe we could find something the great Dawson had overlooked."

Gil sucked in his breath, his temper flaring at the challenge but his worry for the girl holding him in check. He looked up at her, unconsciously tightening his hand around the concha that cinched Larry's guilt. Casey saw the action, her eyes coming back to his face with a swift intentness.

"What did you find? What have you got in your hand?"

"Nothing—much," Gil said and started for his horse.

Ness was off instantly, blocking his way. "Just a minute, cowboy. If you've got something that has a bearing on this business, we're entitled to know about it."

"We?"

"Yes, we! I'm trying to help her—and Larry."

The implication was that the dark-eyed rancher was the only man in the country who was trying to help them, and Gil felt the rise of a hostility he could barely restrain. The tension built up to such a point that even Casey's hand played with a gun. Gil took a deep breath and tried to relax, but it was impossible. He swung savagely back toward Casey, then felt the anger drain out of him as he searched her eyes. They were intense, with a breathless look; and Gil realized that further, futile hope would only torture her. He opened his hand and held it up, watching her in silence.

"Concha," she said, and her face went blank as she recognized it. "Where'd you find it?"

"Right there," Gil said, jerking his head toward the spot.

Ness stepped around him for a curious look. "What's it off of?"

"Larry's chaps." Gil closed his hand, balling it into a hard fist. "I missed it the first time I was here. Maybe the wind drifted something over it, then uncovered it again."

"Or," Casey said flatly, "Maybe somebody put it here after you looked. After they decided to frame Larry!"

Her refusal to believe the evidence before her eyes floored Gil. He stared up at her in blank amazement, seeing the feverish light in her eyes turn desperate as she read his disbelief.

"You're crazy!" she burst out. "Somebody found that concha—or stole it!"

"Miss," Gil said, lifting one hand in entreaty.

"No!" Casey shook her head violently. "Larry didn't do it! He *told* me he didn't!"

"Yeah," Gil said, his voice hard. "He told me that, too."

"He was telling the truth! You've got to believe him, Mr. Dawson. You've got to help me find out who's behind this thing. Larry's no thief, no murderer. Maybe the evidence does look bad, but it just isn't true. He *isn't guilty!*"

Her eyes were shining dangerously and Gil looked away, staggered by her unshakable faith. His feeling for this girl and her crying need were hammering at him mercilessly, beating down his lawman's respect for cold, inarguable evidence.

"There must be some way to prove his innocence," Casey went on, her voice quivering. "You've got to give him a chance. Mr. Dawson, you—you just don't know my brother!"

Gil looked back at her, seeing the one tear that escaped through her lashes and trickled down her cheek. It was more than he could stand. The idea hit him all at once, wild and startling—and brutal; and he acted on it with reckless impulse.

"Maybe I don't," he said deliberately, "but I know one thing. I've got a cool fifty thousand bucks in town that I've been holding on instruction, until it was safe to ship." He paused, waiting for the full impact to hit her. Then he finished coldly. "That'll go out on the ten o'clock stage tonight."

THE SUN had set and a welcome coolness was settling over the town when Gil left his room and descended to the lobby of the hotel, carrying a heavy metal box. There were a number of people present, and he could feel their curious probing stares as he crossed to the desk and deposited his burden.

"For the Blue Mountain Mining Company," he said.

The clerk, a slight, gray-haired man wearing thick glasses, eyed the box with awe. "And you had that up in your room all this time, huh?"

"You heard about it?"

"Everybody in town's heard about it." The clerk looked up admiringly. "You sure fooled 'em that time, Mr. Dawson."

"Not me," Gil said. "The company. Where's your safe?"

"Back here in the office."

Gil followed the man to the rear of the lobby, into a small cluttered room with one darkening window overlooking the alley. While the clerk opened the safe, Gil checked the window, finding it locked but deftly leaving it unlocked.

Back in the lobby, within hearing of the loungers, he paused and said, "If word's got around about that, better see to it there's a shotgun tonight."

"I'll do that, Mr. Dawson."

Gil moved leisurely into the dining room, had his dinner and ordered a tray for the prisoner. He maintained the cool, self-satisfied air of a man who had just completed a difficult job, but inwardly he was in a turmoil. He knew he had hurt Casey, hurt her terribly. There had been no other way to do it; but if this wild gamble proved only that her brother was guilty,

Gil would have hurt Casey for nothing.

Full dark had fallen by the time he reached the sheriff's office. Winstel, sitting in the full glare of the hanging lantern, came to his feet with a lurch.

"Where the hell you been?"

"Wrappin' up some loose ends," Gil said. He set the tray on the desk while he procured the key to the cell, ignoring the worried frown on the sheriff's face.

"Is it true about this shipment you're making tonight?"

"It's true."

"Well, how come you just spit it out like that?"

"Slipped out," Gil said and shrugged. "No difference, I reckon. Did you tell Larry about it?"

"No, I didn't. Kinda seemed like it'd just be rubbin' it in. Dawson, I still—Dammit! I look at the evidence and I know. Then I look at that boy and I think of Casey, and I don't believe it."

Without comment, Gil pulled the concha out of his pocket and dropped it on the desk, searching Winstel's face and letting his own bleak expression do the talking for him.

"So that's where you went," Winstel said heavily. "I guess—that does it."

Gil laid a hand on the old lawman's shoulder. "You go on home, Winstel, and stay there. I'll ride herd this evenin'."

He waited until the sheriff had trudged out of the office. Then he carried the tray in to the prisoner, afterward standing motionless by the door of the cell, studying the face of the man inside. Larry met his gaze squarely, although a flush of embarrassment crept up out of his shirt collar.

"Your sister been in again?" Gil asked suddenly.

"No, she hasn't. Why?"

"Just wondered," Gil said and went back to the office.

He had seen Arlo Ness going into the Last Chance shortly before dark, but he hadn't seen Casey since he left her at the wash and he wondered if she had taken her misery back to the ranch, alone.

Gil paced the room restlessly for several minutes before moving to the open doorway and standing framed in it, staring at the lights of the quiet town. He remained there, idle, until he felt sure he would have been spotted by anyone interested. Then deliberately, he stepped outside and strode unhurriedly toward the hotel.

"Come and get him," he grunted under his breath, and wondered whether he were addressing a phantom who lived only in Casey Bryan's imagination.

He turned into the hotel, still moving casually as he crossed the lobby and climbed the stairs as if heading for his room. Once upstairs, however, he turned along the dim hall and moved swiftly toward the emergency stairway that had been tacked onto the back of the building. If Larry Bryan *had* been framed, the real murderer would lose no time in taking advantage of that unguarded jail. Larry would have to escape before another robbery could be committed, if the frame-up against him were to stand.

The alley was black, empty, no light showing in the hotel office. Moving quickly but silently, Gil let himself into the room and closed the window behind him. Then, feeling his way cautiously, he crossed to the safe and crouched beside it, in a silence that was absolute except for the rapid thud of his own heart.

Time dragged, but he knew he could not have been waiting long when a slight breeze touched his face. The window had been soundlessly opened! Gil grew rigid, straining his eyes until they ached, hope for Casey pounding in him. The window was little more than a vague relief from the utter blackness, but he caught the movement of a figure over the sill, heard the faint protesting creak of a board. More by the sense of feel than by sight or hear-

ing, he marked the progress of the figure toward him, finally heard the whisper of a tight shallow breathing. Then a groping arm brushed him.

Gil grabbed it, jerking it toward him as a sharp gasp ripped the silence. A body fell against him and Gil threw his right arm around it, hauling it up in a tight bear hug. The next instant he froze, his hands rigid on the form he was gripping. The arm in his steely fingers was small, round; and the shoulders under his right arm were slight.

"God Almighty!" he breathed.

Shock held him numb, but his hands instinctively loosened their painful grip. The girl wrenched violently free, shoving at him, gasping in what sounded like terror. The next moment an unseen blow crashed into Gil's head, staggering him. The world dissolved. . . .

THE sound of angry voices brought him out of it and groggily he shoved away from the floor, striving to remember.

"I heard the explosion," someone was saying rapidly. "Didn't make much of a noise and it was a minute or two before it dawned on me. Then I come a-runnin' and found him layin' over here by the desk."

Gil struggled to his feet, swaying drunkenly in the grip of the strong hands helping him. The lamp light seared his brain and he squinted his eyes almost shut, trying to steady them on the grimly accusing face of Sheriff Winstel.

Gil's voice was thick. "Is he gone?"

"He's gone, and so is that fifty thousand bucks!"

"What the hell, Dawson?" someone said with harsh criticism. "I thought you had a reputation for—"

"Get out of my way," Gil said through his teeth.

The men melted away from the door, and Gil stalked out without even bothering to pick up his hat.

The moon was rising, trying to force its light through scattered clouds, when he reached the Bryan ranch. He skirted the barn and corrals and rode directly up to the back of the house, where a lamp shone dully behind drawn curtains. Gil quit his horse and, without a moment's hesitation, stepped up to the door, balled his fist and struck a commanding knock.

He heard a swift rush of feet away from the kitchen, then silence. He grabbed the door knob, thinking, *He's here!* The door was locked and Gil hammered again, then waited, his ears tuned to the sounds of the yard as well as the house. He was about to step away from the door when he heard someone approaching inside, slowly. The lock clicked. Then the door swung open to reveal a white-faced Casey Bryan.

For the space of a few seconds Gil stood rooted, staring down into the unfathomable depths of her eyes. Then bitterness welled up in him and he reached out a long arm to brush her aside, taking one step into the kitchen. As he moved, a white hot pain flashed along his side. At the same moment a gun blasted out behind him and he whirled, grabbing his gun and jumping for the shadows. The gun flamed again, out by the barn, and Gil fired three times at that wink of light. A choking cry broke in the darkness, echoed by Casey's frenzied scream.

"Larry!"

As she dashed out the door, Gil grabbed her arm, jerking her to a stop. Then, holding her with a grip that he knew was hurting, he strode deliberately toward the spot where that man had gone down. The moon broke through, and Gil saw the figure huddled on the ground at the same time that a voice called sharply behind him.

"Take your hands off that girl!"

Gil spun and stopped cold at sight of Larry Bryan approaching, his arms lifted. A second, flashing look at the form on the ground told Gil that it was Arlo Ness, and a sudden, breath-taking relief turned

him rough. Fiercely, he jerked Casey up against him.

"What in the hell," he demanded, "were you doing in that office?"

"I—" Casey swallowed painfully, cringing away from him. "Larry said—that man would go straight—with him locked up. I wanted folks to think—but I didn't take anything!"

"You ran after you slugged me?"

"Yes, I—got scared."

Gil swung to Larry, standing quietly with his arms still raised. "Did she turn you loose?"

"No. It was a man's voice. He tossed the key through the window and told me to get out of the country. I wasn't goin'."

Gil looked back at the girl and pulled in a breath that made his chest ache. "You," he said, "ought to be paddled. The only thing you did right was to knock me so damn far away from that safe that Ness didn't see me when he came in."

"Ness!" Larry's arms came down in abrupt surprise. "Then somebody *did* lift that shipment! I was afraid after Casey told me about it . . . But why, after settin' it up like that, would he give himself away by throwin' down on you here?"

"Still scared of me." Gil loosened his grip on Casey's arm and slid his hand down to her cold little fingers, watching the shadows of doubt and hope play tag across her eyes. "You got me to wonderin'," he said slowly, "whether it was possible for a violet and prickly pear to grow on the same bush, so I set a trap. It—didn't work out just like I'd planned it, but it worked." He grinned ruefully. "That box I put in the safe tonight was the one we found after the stage robbery. When Ness saw the rocks and old newspapers I'd crammed into it, he knew I was still lookin' for the gent who'd stolen it."

Casey flashed a quick look at Larry before bringing her eyes back to Gil. "You *were* helping!" she breathed.

"Yeah." Gil shifted. "And now I'm wonderin' who helps the trouble shooter when *he* gets into trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Heart trouble."

Casey caught her breath as Larry's soft, happy laugh floated around them. Then a glisten came to her eyes, like sunlight through the last drops of rain, and Gil had his answer. Tears, he had decided, didn't know how to lie. ● ● ●

MONTREAL, RAILROAD METROPOLIS

WITH the steam locomotive fast disappearing from the American scene, more and more residents of the eastern United States are visiting our neighborly railroad metropolis to the north. There they find solace in feasting their eyes and focusing their cameras on one of the heaviest concentrations of steam engines still around. Vermonter Philip R. Hastings, for one, took his Speed Graflex across the border and captured some of the best photographs of steamers ever recorded.

Canada's Queen City, situated on the Island of Montreal in the broad St. Lawrence River, served by the great Canadian National and Canadian Pacific and approached by seven railroad bridges, has long been a mecca for steam power connoisseurs, just as *Railroad Magazine* has been *the* expert in the field for almost four decades. Don't miss *Montreal, Railroad Metropolis,* with its 20 great Hastings photos, in the authoritative August *Railroad Magazine.* On sale July 2, or send 35c to

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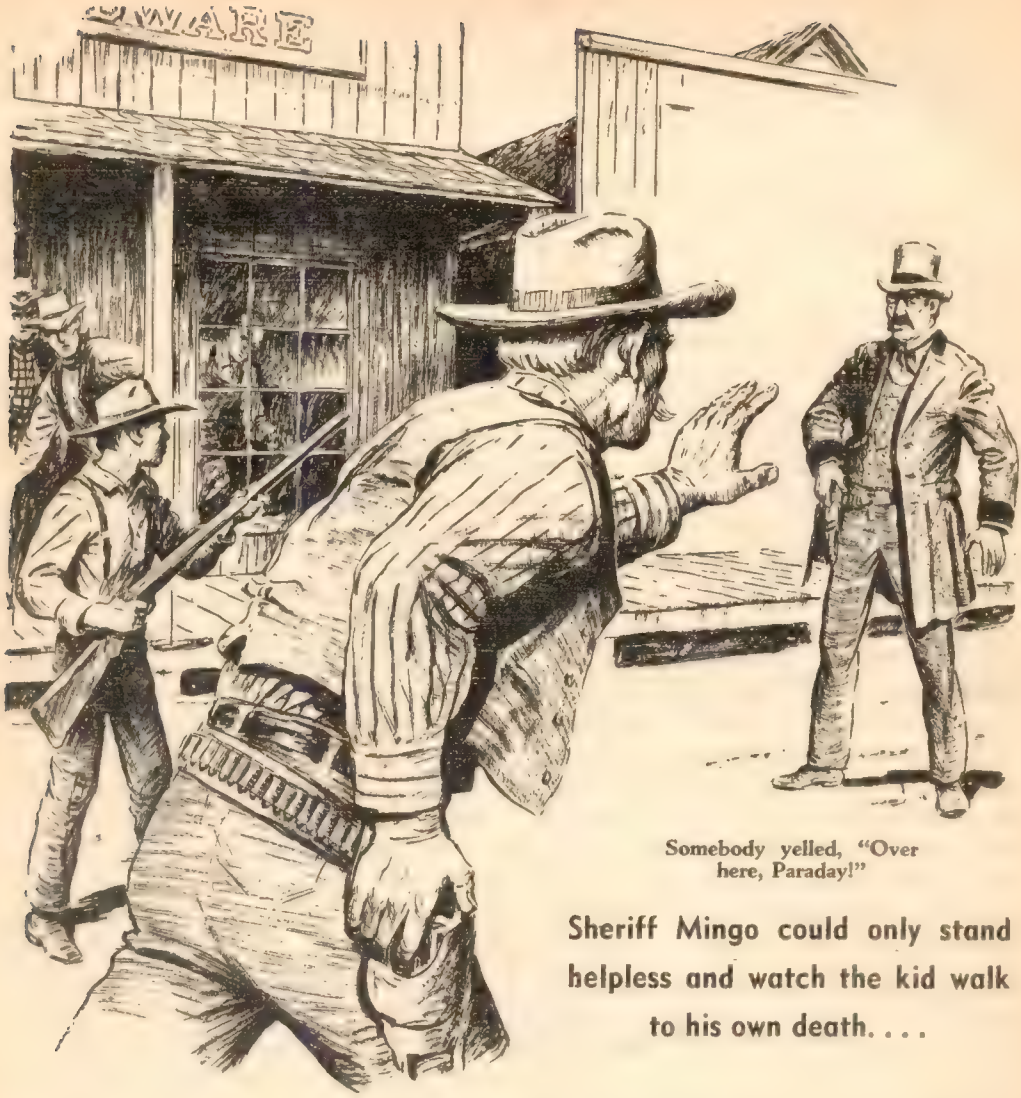


Somebody yelled, "Over here, Paraday!"

Sheriff Mingo could only stand helpless and watch the kid walk to his own death. . . .

ON A MAN'S ERRAND

By WILLIAM H. BRAYTON

IT WAS noon when the boy came into Jed Mingo's office and closed the door, turning his back to watch the door push shut under his hand. Then he faced the sheriff again across the room. He made a small thin figure in levis darkened at the knees by long toil on the ground. Both arms were held unnaturally straight along his body, and one hand hung on to the stock of an old standard gauge shotgun.

Jed Mingo was accustomed to visits from the boys in the town, and he was proud of his ability to hold their friendship. He did not remember this one's face, but he felt

no confusion about that. There were men of forty today that he had known as newborn babies.

"What can I do for you, son?" he asked, tugging at his mustaches.

"You the she'ff, suh?" the boy asked.

The dead sound of the voice made Jed take a harder look at his visitor. The boy's face was frozen in an expressionless flatness out of which a pair of pale blue eyes stared straight forward without the least interest in what they saw. Jed laid the pencil in his hand on the desk.

"That's right, son," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Ah come for Jim Dean."

"Did you say Jim Dean, son? I don't remember but—"

To interrupt him the boy's voice did not rise. "Folks say Jim got kilt last night. Ah'm his brother."

"Oh, you mean the feller—" Jed started to say, and then realized what the boy had said. The shock pushed him half up out of his chair. "Well now, son, I'm mightily sorry about your brother. He—ain't your Daddy and Ma in town? It ain't a fit thing for a boy your age to tote home his—"

"Don't have no family. Just me and Jim on a strip down by the Hoss Crick."

Then Jed remembered him—remembered him as the smaller of two silent figures that came once a month to town on two shaggy plow-horses and then walked, arms tight and straight along their sides, up the street to the general store where they would wait stolidly for Wickson to fill an order carefully penciled out on a roll of brown paper in thick square letters, and then, the man bent forward against the weight of the sack and the boy still maintaining himself with arms stiff at his sides like a new soldier, walked back the way they had come, mounted their horses, and rode away. Someone had said once they came from Horse Creek, and Jed had filed them away there in his mind and never paid much more attention to them.

Jed got up and walked around his desk to put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son," he said quietly. "I'm mightily sorry it happened. You know I'm doin' everythin' I can to get his killer."

The boy did not change his position under Jed's hand, and his voice kept the same dull sound. "Folks say that railroad agent did it. Newt Paraday. They say he said to tell you he kilt him for nothin' at all. He said he'd tell it to yer face."

Jed felt his throat tighten with anger, but following close behind came the realization that he would do nothing to Newt Paraday. He had lost out to the railroad agent two months ago. The town council had said the life of a wandering saddle-bum Paraday had killed meant nothing against Bentleyville's need for a railroad. And Jed Mingo had watched Paraday saunter out of his cell, pick up his guns, and swagger back up the street.

He had tried to put it out of his mind then, but now it was back, and he knew he would have to back down again.

"I—I have to have evidence, son," he said.

"But he said he'd tell it to yer face," the boy repeated. Jed felt the thin shoulder move under his hand, and he knew the boy was looking straight up at him with the same flat blue eyes, waiting for hope.

"I don't reckon I can do anything for you," Jed muttered. He had to somehow avoid the boy's eyes. His own eyes moving desperately around the room happened to glance at the back door of the office, and the thought of the dead man came to him.

"You'll want your brother, I reckon. I put him in the barn under a blanket. You have somethin' to carry him in?"

"Got the buckboard," the boy said. He turned, opened the front door, and stepped out.

JED hesitated and then went out the back door and across the yard to the barn. As he crossed the threshold of the barn he

heard a clatter coming through the alley. The boy pulled the team of plowhorses to a halt and stepped down. Arms straight at his sides and body bent forward rigidly at the waist, he followed the sheriff into the barn.

The body was already stiff, and they had little trouble carrying it to the buckboard. There was neither gentleness nor bruskness in the live brother's movements as he shoved the dead one farther in on the worn floor and put up the tailboard. He climbed onto the driver's seat again and then looked down at Mingo.

"Much obleeged fer keepin' Jim," he said flatly, and drove off.

Jed kept looking at the corner of the jail for some time after the boy had disappeared around it. For the first time in his long life he felt sick and old. All the years as a good sheriff—the long years he had held Bentleyville while the frontier had swung past, first on trapper's moccasins, then high-heeled riding boots, and then the campaign jack-boots of the Army—all these had been stripped from him under the boy's eyes, and he was left a useless old man, whose legs could scarcely support his rotted weight.

The shadows had moved several inches across the yard before he got himself to walk back into his office. He was closing the door behind him when he noticed that a man had drawn up a chair from the opposite wall before his desk. The man was thickset and filled the chair completely. He had laid his plug hat on the desk, revealing a bald head that glistened with a hard finish. It was Wickson, the general storekeeper and chairman of the town council.

"Hell, Jed," Wickson said. When he spoke his thick jaws shifted with a tense power that gave weight to the softest tones in his voice.

"Hello, Mr. Wickson," Jed replied. "Anything I can do for you?" He walked to his desk and stood leaning on his hands between it and the chair.

"Well, Jed, there is something," the storekeeper said. He paused to stare out the front window. The light made hard shining planes of his head. "I heard about Paraday and that young Dean fellow this morning. It was a horrible thing—"

Jed sat down in his chair and pressed his hands tightly together.

"—and mind you, I value a citizen's life as well as the next man. But we have to think of Bentleyville. We all have a big future ahead of us. Why, Jed, I can see our little town as a big city someday. The country around here will be yielding fortunes in grain and livestock long before you or I leave this world. And Bentleyville will have a hand in every single bushel of wheat or pound of beef or load of tools and supplies that comes and goes through it.

"Even Dean's brother will make thousands a year on that strip he's got. This is a big country, Jed, and it's going to get bigger. We can't afford to bother men like Newt Paraday. Later, maybe, but right now we have to let them have their way."

Mingo felt very tired and somehow impatient. "You don't have to worry, Mr. Wickson," he said. "I couldn't hold him before, and I won't arrest him this time, either."

Wickson swung around to look straight at him. "It's not that, Jed," he said quietly. "Young Dean is gunning for Paraday. We can't have any trouble like shooting up a railroad agent. I want you to make sure nothing happens."

"But that boy ain't hardly thirteen years old," Jed objected. "A boy like that ain't out for a shootin'."

The square lines in Wickson's face seemed to settle deeper into the flesh. "His brother was shot last night, and he's carrying a shotgun today. We can't afford to let him use it."

The storekeeper pushed himself out of the chair and walked to the front door. "He's burying his brother at four this afternoon outside the Methodist church. Reve-

rend Buzell is going to read the service. I know you want to help Bentleyville, and the best way to do it is to watch young Dean out of town. Good day, Jed."

The door shut firmly behind him.

MINGO sat down carefully. For a long time after Wickson's footsteps on the boardwalk had died away he tried to think, and not to think, at the same time. It wasn't that he cared about what Wickson and the men like him were going to build—the railroad tracks that would someday divide Bentleyville, or the granaries that would tower over its big houses, or the mile on mile of stockyards. He was too old to want such things.

He had come to the West when three meals a day and a tight roof over their heads was enough for a man and his family. Men thought in simple ways then. They had no use for big and rich things. A town that respected itself paid all of its debts—to peaceful men and killers alike.

Something had happened to his town—something he had been living with for years and never seen. They were all thinking of money instead of men's lives, and he, Jed Mingo, had already gone along with them once.

I could quit this job, he thought, and then the bitterest shock came to him. He was afraid to quit, afraid because he was old, and there was no place for him to go any more.

That's why I let Paraday go that first time, he thought. *I was afraid then—and I'm afraid now.*

The realization hit him hard. He had been a proud man—so proud that he had never even known what shame felt like. Almost before he thought of it, he reached down and fumbled open the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a quart bottle. It was half full.

He jerked at the cork, but it had rotted over the years, and the upper half crumbled away in his hand. He tried to push what was left of it down with his forefinger, but it was stuck hard. Suddenly all the tension and frustration and loathing for himself seemed to concentrate around that cork. Picking up the pencil, he began to jab at it viciously. The pencil broke almost at once, but he kept at it, bruising his fingers on the jagged edges.

Finally, when he thought he would have to smash the neck of the bottle, the cork popped through, and without any preliminaries he set his lips around the mouth and tilted his head back. He drank steadily until the bottle was empty, not even noticing the way it seared his throat. Then he sat back in his chair and deliberately kept his mind from his troubles until the whiskey could reach him.

In a few minutes his taut body relaxed against the chair. Without any restraint his thoughts wandered where they wanted—even over the boy and his dead brother and the sheriff of Bentleyville who was letting them down. And it didn't hurt any more.

He fumbled his silver watch from its vest pocket and saw that it was three-thirty. Setting the old timepiece open on the desk, he watched it until the hands said four, and then stood up, tucking it back into his pocket.

He swept his hat upon his head with a lordly air and strode out the door, slamming it shut with a loud bang. The Methodist church was across the street and several yards up, and he made a straight line through the dust to it. In the little graveyard behind the church he found a newly-dug grave, still empty. Nobody else was about, and he figured vaguely for a moment how much time he might have to slip across the street again for another drink in the Blue Devil Saloon.

Mingo had not been standing long when, with the same clatter of hoofs and sitting with the same straight back, the boy drove his buckboard into the yard. As if he had been lurking behind the door, the Reverend Buzell hurried out to meet him. He was a

tall, thin man, perspiring uncomfortably in a frayed dark suit. Together he and the boy put down the tailboard, revealing a plain wooden box lying where Jed had last seen the elder Dean brother.

Two men whom Jed knew to be from the Horse Creek section walked out to stand with bowed heads beside the boy while the Reverend Buzell read something over the casket from a little black book. Then the four slid the casket out and carried it, the boy supporting an equal load with the men, to a position parallel to the grave. Mrs. Buzell, a gaunt, red-necked woman, came out and stood by the pile of earth while they lowered the box into the hole with the aid of two ropes carefully slid under it by the two farmers.

"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God—" began the minister, and the two farmers began to throw handfuls of dirt onto the casket. Mrs. Buzell moved quietly around the pile of dirt to the boy and put her hands on his shoulders. By the time her husband had reached the "Lord have mercy upon us," she had dropped her hands, leaving the boy looking as straight and hard as he had been the first time Mingo saw him that day.

Because there's a rod of cold iron set into his guts, thought Mingo. *The things he's thinkin' won't tolerate a woman's hands on him.*

"—and the followship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all ever more. Amen," said the Reverend Buzell. He stepped around the grave to the boy and bent down. Although the boy's voice in reply made clear cuts through the thick afternoon air, Jed could not catch what was said. The minister turned away with a shrug, and the two farmers moved in.

Nobody had yet spoken to Jed. Not being a churchgoer, he was not well acquainted with the minister. Nor did he know the two farmers by name. If he had not drunk the whiskey, he might have felt a little embarrassment, but he was actually enjoying himself in a quietly raucous way—watching the comic pantomime through his drunkenness as if from the wrong end of a telescope.

One of the farmers turned away and began to walk up the street, but the other stayed to say something urgently to the boy. Young Dean's voice was clear and cold, and whatever he said made the farmer turn on his heel and walk away.

Mrs. Buzell, who had followed her husband a few steps toward the church, now turned and ran back to the boy. Bending over him, she whispered something in his ear. Her hands, worn and red like her neck, fluttered nervously in the air behind his back. After a while she backed away from him, her hands still fluttering, and a look of bewilderment on her kind face.

She wants to mother him, Mingo thought; *but he's like no other boy she ever saw. Now they've all talked to him, and it's my turn.*

HE STARTED to move over toward the boy, when he happened to glance up the street. The first farmer was walking stolidly up the steps of the hotel, and Jed suddenly understood that the man had been sent to Paraday—sent to call him out on the street.

Jolted, he turned back to the boy, and for the first time since he left with his brother's body from Mingo's barn, the boy looked straight at him. The flat blue eyes took him in quietly, added him up and subtracted him, and got zero. Mingo knew there was nothing to say any more. He had cashed his own hand in a long time ago.

The boy walked across the graveyard and into the street. Mingo, as if the small figure in front of him were some important part of his own body, stumbled over the graves behind him.

Up the street a tall man in a knee-length coat strolled out of the hotel and stopped in the middle of the way. With his back to the setting sun, Paraday looked like a giant. People began to fade away into the build-

ings along the street. Only Mingo remained where he was on the boardwalk, slightly to the rear of the boy.

Young Dean began to stalk up the street, his back still as flat as a board, the standard gauge held at his side. Paraday shifted his feet so that they spread wide, and waited. The only sound was a small eddy of dust scraping across the street and breaking itself against a building.

Watching the boy's flat straight back pass up the street toward Paraday, Mingo remembered where he had seen a face like that before. Once he had passed William Bonney on the street—the Kid who had made his first killing at the age of thirteen—and he had for one moment looked into the same cold eyes that were not even human enough to hold hate. He knew then that the boy would lose, even if he got his shot in first. For angry men like Wickson and unwilling men like Jed Mingo would never let him stop killing.

And they's only one man could stop it, he thought, *and that's Paraday, and he won't because he knows a boy thirteen can pull a trigger as well as a grown man.*

He saw that the boy's steps were shortening and sensed that Paraday knew it, too. The big man's hands were creeping up to the edges of his coat.

Abruptly, with a tenseness that made his movements seem to Mingo like slow motion, the boy's right foot slapped down and to the side, presenting his body sidewise to Paraday, the standard gauge jerking up in a tight arc.

Somebody yelled, "Over here, Paraday!" then, and Jed felt the hitching-rail under his outstretched hand, felt himself swinging over it, and the dust of the street beneath his boots moving with the rest of the town past him, and something was in his hand, and he knew it was his gun. It came to him only then, when running by the boy, that it was he who had shouted.

The street was full of voices, none of which seemed to come from any place, but which he knew came from all around him. It was Wickson calling, "Don't, Jed!" and Paraday: "Look out, you old fogey!" and himself senselessly repeating, "Over here, Paraday!"

HE FELT suddenly as if he had struck an invisible wall with his left shoulder and knew that Paraday must have fired, although he could not hear the explosion. He realized then that as far back as when he had cleared the hitching-rail, he had been seconds late in making his move.

He had been seconds late behind the world for a long time, and he had to make them up when there were no more left. Staggering for his balance, he pressed the trigger of the forty-five once, pulled the hammer back with his thumb, and shot once again before the gun slipped from his hand and he fell into the dust.

Falling, he heard the shots for the first time. They seemed to come all at once in a brief crescendo of thunder and—just as briefly—left the air empty of sound.

He knew, face down in the street as he was, that his shots had gone straight, but he had stopped caring—only waiting for the pain that had to come into him. It hit him hard, and there was a new one, lower down below his left rib, and he knew Paraday must have gotten him again, this time for good.

For the first time he thought of death. It frightened him, because there was one thing he had to see first. With a great effort, he pushed his elbows beneath him and heaved his body half over, so that he could look at young Dean.

The boy was standing across the street, staring at him with blank eyes. Then his hard chiseled features seemed to crumple up like a ball of paper, and he dropped to his knees with his hands over his face. His whole body began to shake with sobs—a child's sobs that were hard in coming. Mrs. Buzell scurried across Mingo's line of vision

(Continued on page 112)

SON OF THE

By E. B. MANN

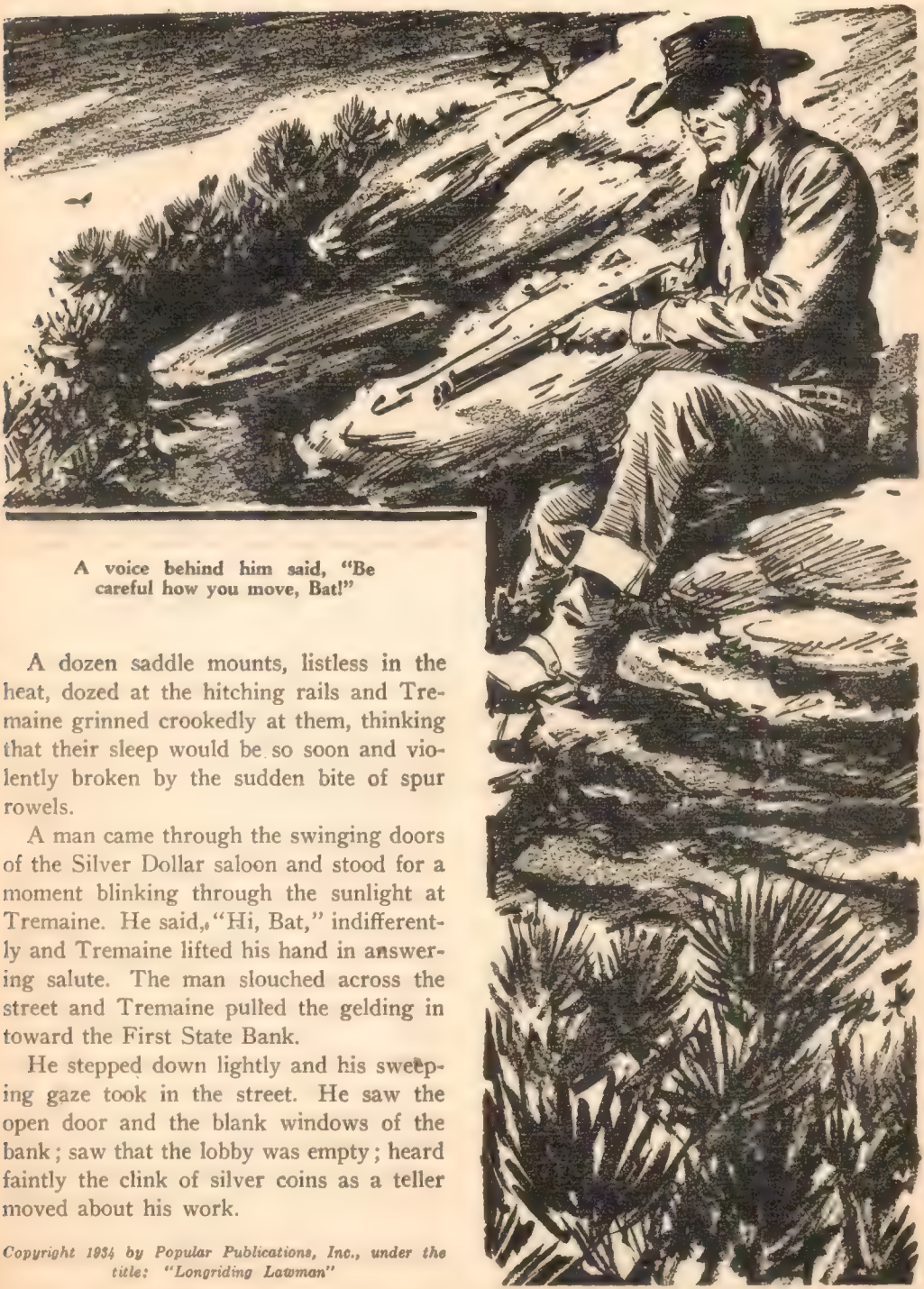
CHAPTER ONE

Treacherous Citizen

SAN ANDRES, cowtown capital of San Andres County, lay torpid and silent under a sweltering afternoon sun as Bartlett Tremaine rode into its somnolent main street. But Tremaine himself was seething with a tension that surged and beat against his outward calm. The tall red gelding under him caught the contagion of his rider's nerves and curveted uneasily so that the bridle reins made smears of creamy lather on his neck.

Slick Mitchell was the most feared badman in San Andreas county. Bat Tremaine, ex-rancher, was purely a pilgrim at the grim game. Yet together they made outlaw history!

DARK TRAILS



A voice behind him said, "Be careful how you move, Bat!"

A dozen saddle mounts, listless in the heat, dozed at the hitching rails and Tremaine grinned crookedly at them, thinking that their sleep would be so soon and violently broken by the sudden bite of spur rowels.

A man came through the swinging doors of the Silver Dollar saloon and stood for a moment blinking through the sunlight at Tremaine. He said, "Hi, Bat," indifferently and Tremaine lifted his hand in answering salute. The man slouched across the street and Tremaine pulled the gelding in toward the First State Bank.

He stepped down lightly and his sweeping gaze took in the street. He saw the open door and the blank windows of the bank; saw that the lobby was empty; heard faintly the clink of silver coins as a teller moved about his work.

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The stage is set, he thought. *It's up to me.*

He left the bridle reins across the saddle horn; lifted a pair of saddle bags from their place and slung them across his arm. The gelding nuzzled him and Tremaine spoke softly as he touched the horse's velvet nose.

He hitched his belt forward so that the holstered guns tipped properly against his thighs. Then, as he stooped to pass beneath the hitching rail, he pulled his neck-scarf up across his face. It fitted snugly.

HE CROSSED the sidewalk in two long strides, his spur-wheels jingling. He stepped aside as he passed inside the bank; felt solid wall against his back and whipped his right gun up. The teller's face made an oval blur inside the wicket just ahead and Tremaine's voice cut through the hot silence in the room. "Hoist 'em, Patterson. If your hand goes out of sight below that ledge, I'll shoot. That goes for you too, Halliday."

They obeyed automatically, their movements jerky with haste. He reached out carefully, pulled the door behind him partly shut and then stepped forward until he stood before the teller's cage. The saddlebags scraped noisily as he pushed them across the ledge. "Fill 'em, Patterson," he said. "Bills only, though."

Tremaine watched Patterson slide packets of crisp bills into the saddle bags. He dropped a bundle and stooped swiftly to pick it up. A heavy filing drawer stood on a stool just back of him and as he bent he struck the stool. The drawer tipped and fell with a resounding crash in which was mingled Patterson's startled yelp.

A chair scraped noisily across the floor in the office back of the lobby and Tremaine's jaw set stubbornly beneath his mask. So Hurley would be in it too, he thought; Tom Hurley, president of the First State Bank and rising financier.

"Fill up that other bag," he snapped. "Make it quick!"

The office door burst open and a dark-haired giant of a man stood in the opening, his close-set eyes upon Tremaine. Tremaine's left gun flipped up. The big man froze, then scowled and raised his hands shoulder high. Tremaine could almost feel the impact of that searching gaze; he knew that Hurley's eyes had pierced his thin disguise.

"You must need money pretty bad, eh, Bat?"

"Not after this, I won't!" Tremaine's answer was sharp, echoing the swift hot wrath this man's presence always bred in him. It had been so since the first time they met, ten years ago; an instant unreasoning enmity that grew into a bitter boyhood feud. A dozen times since then Tremaine had battered Hurley's bigger body down before his fists. Not easily, for Hurley was a fighting man; but even Hurley's greater bulk could not withstand the slashing, fierce intensity of Tremaine's attack.

A return of the old bitterness filled the masked man as he thought: *Last time, we fought over Sally Ware, only neither one of us admitted that. . . . I've licked him every time, and yet I reckon he's the better man. He's gone ahead; made money; come up from nothin' to be a business man. And I've lost out. I'm just a busted cattleman with a reputation for bein' sudden with a gun. . . . He'll get Sally, now. I haven't got one chance in hell to square myself with her.*

He deliberately pulled the scarf down from his face. "Reach higher, Tom," he said. "If you're figurin' to draw your hide-out gun, change your mind."

The big man's hands slid up above his head and Tremaine grinned, not pleasantly. "You forced me into this," he said, "refusin' me that loan. I'll lose my spread. I'm takin' cash to pay for it—in advance!"

He paused abruptly, listening to the click of heels across the floor. Tom Hurley stepped a pace to one side, and Tremaine's eyes leaped to rest upon the girl who stood

in Hurley's office door. It was Sally Ware.

Tremaine's breath caught oddly in his throat, just looking at her. She was not beautiful, yet there was something in her steady eyes and grave firm lips that made a man reach out to her. Sunlight falling through a window back of her laid overtones of bronze across her hair and Tremaine remembered suddenly that they had called her "Red" long ago and that she had hated it.

Her voice was low, more hurt than chiding. "You're not going through with this, Bat," she said. "You can't."

Tremaine was filled with an inner hurt. He hadn't planned on this. Then Tremaine stiffened, listening to the sudden thunder of hard-running hoofs.

The pouding broke cadence suddenly as the riders halted just outside. Somewhere in the street a man yelled; a shot cracked out. Tremaine snatched up the saddlebags and leaped toward the door. He saw Hurley's right hand drop for the draw. He wheeled, his left hand on the door, his right gun poised. He saw Sally Ware leap forward desperately and fling herself at Hurley's chest; saw her hands grip hard on Hurley's wrist.

A body struck the door at Tremaine's back and the impact flung him to the left. The opening door protected him and he waited, crouched behind it alertly, watching Hurley's face. The big man's jaw sagged crookedly and Tremain felt an insane desire to laugh. Hurley's right arm straightened slowly, swinging Sally Ware behind him.

Three men, masked and armed, surged through the door into the bank and Tremaine's heart skipped a beat. There was an instant's pause. Patterson, in the teller's cage, gulped audibly and Tremaine saw him sway, his hands still up. A voice snapped a sharp command.

Tremaine saw suddenly that Sally's eyes were fixed on him and he moved his left hand toward the wall. She moved, and Tremaine felt a surge of pride in her. *She's not afraid,* he thought. And then, exultantly, *She turned to me, not Tom, to tell her what to do!*

Tom Hurley grinned a sickish grin. "You're just too late," he said. "I just *been* cleaned! . . . Or maybe, you're just in time!"

SILENCE followed Hurley's speech. One of the three masked men jerked quickly and started to turn but his partner caught his arm and laughed. "It's an old gag, Hurley; that 'look behind you' stuff. This time it ain't gonna work. You got a gun under your coat."

Tremaine's curt voice came next. "This ain't a joke. Don't move—I've got the drop." He heard the masked men gasp; saw them sway uncertainly as if to turn. He saw Sally's quick approving smile; heard Hurley's laugh. But the laughter froze in Hurley's throat as Tremaine spoke again. "It ain't your turn to crow, Tom. There seems to be some doubt about who's holdin' up this bank. You lose, whichever way it goes!"

He grinned crookedly at Hurley's rage-distorted face, but his amusement died at sight of Sally Ware's hurt look. Tremaine stepped forward to the open door, then reached back carefully with one foot; found the step down to the walk. He stepped down and whirled, dodging from the opening.

What followed came with blinding speed. Tremaine caught a fleeting glimpse of a fat man, near the horses at the hitching rail. He saw a gun flip up as the fat man fired and felt a bullet snick his hat brim. He dropped and fired deliberately from his knees, saw the fat man fall.

Tremaine lunged up and took one hasty step toward his waiting mount. A rattling volley halted him from windows up and down the street. Tremaine's retreat was blocked.

Lead sang about him as he sprinted back

into the bank. He leaped inside and slammed the heavy door. Behind the masked men facing him he saw Tom Hurley's right hand streaking toward the gun he wore beneath his coat. And Tremaine knew instantly that he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

In the bandits' eyes he saw stark fear and desperate haste; knew instinctively that they would focus their attack on him. In that split second, as Tom Hurley made his draw, Tremaine mapped out his battle-plan. He leaped aside across the window opening at his left into a corner.

He yelled a curt command at Hurley, but his voice was drowned in the thunder of guns. His left gun spoke; the masked man nearest him bent slowly at the waist and fell.

Smoke lay in thick blue swirls before him now and Tremaine stepped aside a little, guns poised to meet the third man's fire. Hurley's gun spat sharply from his left and Tremaine felt the slug burn past his eyes.

He heard Sally Ware cry out sharply and he crouched, waiting for Tom Hurley's shot. Till now he had been cool, each move coldly calculated and precise. But anger flamed up in him now, a red hot passion such as he had never known. It was as if Hurley's shot had been a match setting off the stored up powder of Tremaine's old hate. The smoke hid Hurley from him, but he could wait.

"Shoot, Tom! Why don't you shoot?" He had not meant to speak aloud but the sound of his voice steadied him. "Shoot, Tom. You missed the other time. I'm givin' you another chance." *And when he shoots,* he thought, *he'll show me where he is.*

A BURST of gunfire from the street smashed through the window back of him and the smoky curtain split and swung aside. And then Tremaine saw why Hurley did not shoot, for the banker's big body lay across the office door and Sally Ware bent over him. Sally said, "Help me, Bat. He's hurt."

He walked toward her, heedless of the lead that sang about him from the street. Blood made a livid line across Tom Hurley's face and there was blood on Sally's hands. Tremaine bent down and suddenly he grinned.

"He ain't dead, Sally," he said. "A bullet creased his scalp, that's all. He's tough. A little thing like that won't bother him. . . . You love him, don't you, Sally?"

It was a crazy thing to say, he knew; a crazy time to say it, too, with bullets spatting above their heads. But Sally answered steadily. "No, I don't love him, Bat." She met his eyes. "You're hurt too, Bat. What brought you into this?"

His glance fell on the filled saddlebags lying now across Tom Hurley's legs. He caught up the bags and met Sally's gaze. "What usually makes a man hold up a bank?"

"Not money," she said steadily, "in your case, Bat. You wouldn't pay what that kind of money would cost you."

He reached down suddenly and touched her hand. "You keep right on thinkin' that," he said. "It's true. You'll understand some day, I hope."

He turned swiftly, moving back through Hurley's office into a narrow hall.

An iron door, heavily barred, opened into the alley at the rear, and he could hear men moving noisily outside. A ladder ran aloft beside the door to a narrow opening overhead, and Tremaine grinned at sight of it. He slung the saddlebags across his arm and climbed. The sunlight streaming through the opening blinded him for a moment, but he heard no sound. He pushed the trap aside and climbed out on the flat tarred roof. A waist-high balustrade ran solidly across the front and rear. Beyond him the chatter of guns still pounded at the bank.

Bent double, he made his way quickly to the side, where a narrow canyon ran between him and the roof of the adjoining building. He leapt across, apparently unseen. In that manner, he crossed three neighboring roofs to the last building before a vacant lot. Here an outside stairway ended on a narrow landing just below him and Tremaine dropped upon it.

The sign upon the glass of the closed door facing him there read, DRAKE TAMERLIN, M. D. Tremaine turned the knob and stepped inside. The place was empty.

He knew this office as well as he knew his own small room. He had sat in that operating chair yonder, swearing, while Doc Tamerlin set the bones in the hand he had broken on Tom Hurley's head eight years ago. He grinned, remembering that Doc had warned him then, "Don't ever use your naked fists against the head of a black Irishman, Tremaine. Their skulls are solid bone. I'm one myself—that's how I know!"

He walked back into the smaller room where Tamerlin slept. That too was empty, the bed a tumbled mass of quilts and clothes. Beneath the bed a solid phalanx of shoes and boots and books set up a dusty barrier and Tremaine parted it to peer beyond. He grinned and pushed the saddle bags beneath the bed.

Crossing the office swiftly, he stepped outside and down again. A crowd was gathered in front of the bank. He walked toward it swiftly, as a man who has no need for fear.

A man was talking rapidly in the doorway of the bank and as Tremaine mounted he recognized the speaker. It was the teller, Patterson.

He heard a voice cut in: "Yuh say Bat Tremaine was in it too?"

Then Patterson's indignant answer: "Sure! He *did* the job. The others butted in, but Bat got clean away."

The sorrel pivoted and felt the pressure of his rider's spurs. A man yelled sharply and Tremaine bent low above the saddle horn. A gun cracked out behind him and he swung the sorrel to the right, across the vacant lot beyond Doc's stairs and into the alley at the rear.

"Let's go, red horse!" he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Owlhoot Breed

THE news of the robbery had not yet reached Buck Travers, the youthful sheriff of San Andres County. He shot a furtive look at his watch and made a move as if to rise from his chair on the porch of Stephen Ware's big Running W ranch house, thirty miles outside town. Tommy Etheridge moved with him, but Ware's gruff voice halted them. "You boys ain't leavin' here until you answer my questions."

"Ask away," Travers told him wearily.

"You're sheriff, ain't you? I'm losin' stock. So are you, Etheridge. So's every other rancher hereabouts. It's your job to put a stop to that, Buck. I've known you since you was a yearlin' and I like you, but so far you ain't cut no more ice as sheriff than old Dad Summers did before you."

Travers stirred restlessly. "I've done the best I could," he said. "Half a dozen times I've trailed stolen stock as far as Lookout Gap. Twice I've took posses in to try to pry Slick Mitchell out of the Sink and both times my posse quit on me. Is that my fault?"

"I reckon not," Ware agreed. "But I ain't blamin' the men for quittin', either. Mitchell's got a natural stronghold up there and a big gang of fightin' men to hold it. You'll never pry him out of it by force. It's up to you to figure out some other way."

"Maybe I have," Travers said. "Anyway, I got a man workin' on it."

Ware leaned forward with sudden interest. "What man? And what's the plan?"

Travers frowned. "The man is Bat Tremaine," he said unwillingly. "The plan ain't definite, of course, but—"

Ware sat back in his chair. "Tremaine!" he grunted. "Some ways you're pretty smart, Travers, but when it comes to Bat Tremaine you're blind. I know you and him and Tommy here are friends; grew up together. I got nothin' against Tremaine myself, but after all, what is he anyway but a wild, gun-fightin' no-account?"

Etheridge sat up suddenly and frowned. "Wait a minute, Ware," he said. "You got an anonymous letter awhile back suggestin' if you want to know what's become of your beef, you might find out from the railroad what rancher's shippin' the most cattle out o' here. You find out that Dan Harrison has shipped more than any other man. So you call Buck in to tell him that, figurin' you've been pretty smart. Suppose I tell you Bat Tremaine made that same investigation more'n a month ago?"

Ware blinked. "I ain't sayin' Bat ain't smart," he said defensively.

"He was smart enough to know that what he found didn't amount to shucks," Travers said calmly. "Harrison's got money. He can buy cattle cheap and hold 'em for a raise. That's what he's done; bought from every outfit hereabouts these past two years. Of course he's shipped a lot of beef."

"He ain't bought as many as he's shipped," Ware insisted stubbornly.

"You can't prove that," Travers said. "Anyway, we was talkin' about Bat Tremaine. What you got against him, Ware? Aside from the fact that your daughter, Sally, likes him?"

Ware bristled. "My daughter likin' him ain't got a thing to do with it," he said. "I thought when he borrowed money and bought that Bar 6 spread he was fixin' to settle down and maybe amount to somethin'. But what's he done? Instead o' building up that spread, he's sold most all his stock to pay his gamblin' debts."

Buck Travers grinned suddenly. "If you think Bat sold his beef to pay gamblin' debts it just proves you never played poker with him. For an honest gambler, Bat's as sure a winner as I ever seen."

"Then what does he do with his money?"

"By God, I think I'll tell you!" Travers snapped. "Bat never would; and for Sally's sake as well as Bat's you ought to know."

HE GLANCED at Etheridge for approval. Etheridge nodded and Travers began to manufacture a cigarette as he spoke. "It goes back quite a ways, this story does; back to when Bat's dad, Jim Tremaine, was killed five years ago.

"Jim had been quite a gun-fighter himself, in his day, and he didn't want Bat to be like him. So Jim Tremaine decided that the thing for him to do was to get Bat out of cow-country. So he ups and sells his T Slash spread to Big Dan Harrison."

Travers paused, frowning as he struck a match to light his smoke. "The deal took place in a back room in the Silver Dollar saloon. Harrison gets into town late and Bat and me was playin' billiards out in front when Harrison comes out and announces that he owns the T Slash and sets up the drinks. Bat was sightin' down his cue when Harrison makes his little speech and when I look at him his face looks froze. He lays down his cue and the two of us walk outside. We pick up Etheridge and start to build ourselves a jag. Bat drank more raw whisky that night than he's ever done since, but it never fazed him.

"Tom Hurley was a sort of assistant cashier and office boy in the bank then, but he was a notary and they had him in to run his brand on the papers. Harrison paid over thirty thousand dollars in cash. Tremaine didn't like the idea of packin' that wad home at night, and the bank was closed, so he took a room upstairs over the Silver Dollar. Long about midnight me and Bat was in the Silver Dollar again when some gun goes off upstairs. A bullet

comes through the ceilin' and hits a dance-hall girl. When Bat jumped toward them stairs I followed him. The door to Tremaine's room was locked but Bat goes through it like it was paper. We found Tremain stretched out across the bed, shot through the throat."

Travers frowned as the scene came back to him. "We bent over him, tryin' to get him to tell who shot him. He tried, but he couldn't make the grade. Bat found his dad's gun under the pillow. He picked that up and Tremaine sort of nodded and tried to speak and reached out and touched the gun and smiled.

"That was the end of it. Bat figured his dad was tryin' to tell him to take that gun and get the murderer, and he swore he would. He's worn that gun and the mate to it ever since. But the killer never left a trace. The motive was plain enough, because the cash Tremaine had took from Harrison was gone. Somebody's set a ladder up to the window of Tremaine's room and got in that way. But the ground there in the yard was packed down hard and showed no sign. . . . Bat sort of changed, after that. Finally he took over that Bar 6 spread."

Travers paused and glanced at Ware. "You say Bat ain't made much of a go at runnin' that spread. He ain't. He's made money out of it, though; too much money. He's stripped his herds till he's damned near wiped 'em out. And he's made money gamblin'."

"Then what's he done with it?" Ware said curtly. "Tom Hurley told me yesterday Bat was tryin' to borrow more."

"And Tom refused," Travers said. "Here's how it is. That dancehall girl that got hit the night Tremaine was killed—the bullet did somethin' to her spine. Bat sent her East; got her the best doctors money can hire. Every dime he's got since then has gone to meet the bills. That's why he's wrecked his spread. Them doctors say now that they can cure her by an operation, but it'll cost three thousand bucks. . . . It was three thousand bucks Bat tried to borrow from the bank. He said he aimed to use it to pay off part of the mortgage on his spread. He didn't, though. He aimed to send it to that girl."

STEPHEN WARE was leaning forward now and there was a new light in his eyes. "But hell!" he said. "Bat didn't have to do all that, did he? It wasn't up to him. This girl—she wasn't anything to him, was she?"

"Bat didn't even know her name," Buck Travers said emphatically. "But Jim Tremaine had a gun in his hand when he died; the mate to the one that was under the pillow. There was one shot out of it. Bat figured it might've been his dad's slug that hit the girl. Anyway, he took the full responsibility."

The drum of running hoofs came to them through the silence following and Travers turned to watch a pinto horse come down the lane toward the house. The horse was lathered and the figure in the saddle was erect and slim. "There's Sally," Travers said.

"She's been to town," Ware said. "I wonder what's the rush?"

"To town?" Travers said sharply. He glanced at Etheridge and then fell silent suddenly, watching the pinto's sliding halt. The girl swung down and Travers saw that Sally's face was drawn and taut, and Travers saw the misery in her eyes.

"Bat Tremaine just robbed the First State Bank," she said.

Travers heard the scrape of Stephen Ware's chair across the floor as Ware stood up. He heard Ware's voice, harsh with sudden anger. "So that's the man you been tryin' to make a hero of!"

But Travers aimed his question at the girl. "Did he get away?"

"He got away, all right. With nearly fifty thousand dollars in small bills. Just as he was leaving, four other men—some

of Slick Mitchell's bunch—stepped in with the same idea. Bat shot it out with them; killed Frenchy Clark and a man named Anderson and wounded the other two. Tom Hurley was hit—not badly, though. Bat left, with twenty men close after him."

"They'll never catch him," Etheridge breathed. "There ain't a horse in Texas that can catch that big red colt of Bat's."

"Which leaves it sort of up to you, Buck," Ware said flatly. "You won't enjoy it much, but it's your job."

Travers shrugged but did not speak. He hitched his gunbelt forward on his hips and walked slowly down the steps, past Sally Ware, toward his horse. Tommy Etheridge came after him and they mounted silently and rode straight east along the trail toward the county seat.

"Now ain't that hell!" Buck Travers said disgustedly. "Here we send Bat to rob that bank for the sole and only reason of brandin' him an outlaw so he can throw in with Mitchell's gang; and then Bat salts down four good men of Slick's. Which ain't goin' to earn him much of a welcome in the Sink!"

"If I was him," Etheridge said feelingly, "I'd point myself in some good direction and keep right on goin'. Folks say dishonest money don't do a man no good; but me, I'd rather worry along with that fifty thousand dollars than try to apologize to Tom Hurley for takin' it, or to explain to Mitchell why I killed those men. If Bat is smart he'll head for distant parts."

"He won't," Buck Travers said. "Not Bat Tremaine. He'll fight it out!"

SUNLIGHT touched the cold gray tip of Bald Mountain when Tremaine awoke. He lay motionless for a time, staring down through early mists toward the shack in the park-like valley beneath the ledge on which he lay. In the thicker growth nearby Tremaine's big sorrel grazed contentedly.

Tremaine grinned fondly as he watched the horse. The run out of San Andres yesterday had been fast, but the big red colt had made short work of it. Within five miles Tremaine had gained a lead enabling him to swing aside unseen into the hills. And few men knew the hills as Tremaine knew them. That topsy-turvy land of jagged rock slashed criss-cross with twisting canyons had been his boyhood playground. Until last night he would have sworn that only he and Tommy Etheridge and Buck Travers knew of the cabin that lay below him.

But Tremaine had arrived last night to find the cabin occupied. Lights there had warned him off.

A sack of provisions, cached in readiness and picked up in the course of his flight the day before, lay across his saddle on the ledge, but he dared not light a fire—yet.

A piebald steer blundered through the underbrush below the ledge and halted to stare dubiously at Tremaine's horse. Bat leaned forward suddenly, his eyes narrowing, his hunger forgotten as he stared back at the ungainly beast. With the stockman's uncanny knack of identifying individual animals, Bat could have recognized that steer without reference to his own brand—the Bar Six—along its flank. The brand, however, had been freshly vented, and the newer brand was Harrison's T Slash.

Tremaine frowned. "I ain't sold a head to Harrison in months," he mused. "And that brand is fresh; unhealed. What's more, I never did sell *that* critter to him, any time!"

A second animal came through the brush and Tremaine saw that this one wore Stephen Ware's Running W, marked out and replaced by another freshly burned T Slash. Tremaine grinned crookedly.

"So that's the way it is," he said aloud. "So that's why Harrison's been buyin' cattle everywhere! I should've known."

A voice behind him said, "So now you've got it straight, eh, Bat? . . . Be careful how you move!"

Tremain turned his head very carefully. The man who sat carelessly upon the rim of rock a little above the ledge was holding a rifle pointed straight at Bat. Tremaine grinned, exhibiting a confidence he did not feel. "Why, howdy, Slick," he said. "You startled me."

"It was to keep from startlin' you that I waited till you was wide awake and had your back to me before I spoke," Slick Mitchell said. "I hear you're sudden with a gun. I didn't want to have to knock you down."

MITCHELL'S dark thin features twisted in a grin. He was a handsome man; not large, but molded with a lithe lean grace that bespoke speed and wiry strength. "I don't hold any grudge about what happened yesterday in town," he said. "I never back a loser, nor mourn the loss of one. It's the man who wins who interests me. You won."

"Now you've found me," Bat said slowly, "what comes next?"

Slick Mitchell shrugged. "You need a hidin' place, Tremaine," he said. "And me, I need a man like you."

Bat dropped his eyes to hide the surge of triumph that welled up in him. Here was the thing he sought. "Name your proposition, Slick," he said.

"I'm askin' you to join my gang, that's all. Safety from the law, and a share in everything we take, in exchange for half of what you took from Hurley's bank yesterday."

Tremaine looked up, his face expressionless. "That's out," he snapped. "I did the job alone—I'll spend the cash."

He saw Mitchell's eyes harden. "You're forgettin' that I've got the drop," Mitchell said softly. The outlaw's eyes shifted to the sack that lay across the saddle on the ledge. "I was offerin' you a break," he said. And suddenly Bat understood and grinned.

"There's groceries in the sack, Mitchell; not money. I cached the loot last night. You wouldn't earn a dime by droppin' me."

He saw the triumph fade from Mitchell's face, replaced by humorous chagrin. "You're smarter than I thought, Tremaine," Mitchell admitted. "But the proposition stands. We split, or else!"

Their glances met and held for a moment, then Tremaine grinned suddenly and shrugged. He had not wanted to agree too readily, yet Mitchell's offer was exactly the terms which he would have made himself. Yesterday in Hurley's bank when he had realized that his success had cost the lives or liberty of four of Mitchell's men he had feared that his plan to join the Mitchell gang was doomed. But then he had remembered the money in his saddlebags.

"Okay," he said. "We split."

Mitchell's gaze was fixed intently on some object further down the slope and Bat went on. "The money's hid in town. You'll have to wait—"

Mitchell sheathed his gun and stood up hastily. "That's all okay," he said. "Right now we've got other fish to fry. I'm here to see Dan Harrison. He just rode in. You saddle up and I'll meet you down the slope. Never mind the sack; there's grub a-plenty where you're goin'."

He paused and met Bat's gaze, his own eyes narrowing. "How do you stand with Harrison?" he asked. "There may be trouble comin' up. Are you his friend?"

Bat shook his head. "Not so you'd notice it!" he snapped. "I've always sort of wondered why Harrison paid my dad in cash the night he bought the ranch, and why he was late that night—so late the bank was closed."

HE WAITED, hardly breathing as he watched the outlaw's face. But Mitchell laughed. "I was forgettin' that," he said. "I reckon I can count on you, all right. Fact is, if I had looked for trouble right away I'd have brought my men. But I ain't ready to show my hand."

He turned and disappeared. Down along

the wooded slope, toward the shack below, five horses stood with dragging reins before the cabin. Watching them, Tremaine recognized Dan Harrison's big palomino.

He saddled up and mounted and rode down the slope to find Mitchell waiting for him among the trees. The palomino mare threw up her head and nickered softly as they came into the yard and the sound somehow set Tremaine's nerves on edge. Three men squatted on their heels against the sunny wall of the shack and Bat caught their steady stares beneath the brims of battered hats. Two other men stood indolently beside the cabin door and a sixth came up toward them from a rickety corral below the house.

They halted in front of the cabin and Mitchell spoke from the saddle. "Dan Harrison here?" he asked.

A man beside the step jerked his thumb toward the door. "Inside," he said. It was like a terse command.

Mitchell swung down lightly but Tremaine delayed dismounting until Mitchell's feet were on the ground. He stepped down then and heard Mitchell's low chuckle, barely audible. "Keepin' your eye on 'em, eh, Bat? Good man! Looks like we're in for it."

But Mitchell did not glance to either side as he walked toward the door and Tremaine, coming after him, was conscious of a rising admiration for the man. For there was danger here, Bat knew; stark hatred waiting for a spark to set it into flame. He felt it, hardly knowing how he knew. Yet Mitchell walked deliberately into the teeth of it, completely confident and unafraid.

He crossed the step and came into the semi-darkness of the room. Dan Harrison sat facing them across a table in the corner of the room. Bat heard the tiny sounds of movement back of him; knew without the need to turn and look that the men outside were closing in to block retreat.

Mitchell spoke to Harrison: "Good mornin', Dan. Meet Bat Tremaine, a new recruit. I've come to get the money for that last bunch o' steers."

And Harrison's answer, flat and ugly in the pulsing silence of the room. "I've met Tremaine. You'll not get any money here, though, Slick. I'm wise to you . . . you double-crossin' skunk!"

CHAPTER THREE

Slick Holds the Cards

NOW that the actual gage of battle was laid down, Bat's brain worked swiftly. He heard Slick Mitchell's voice, level and unstressed, yet with a metallic hardness in it. "You've called a name. You'd better lay your cards face up."

Again Bat felt a grudging admiration for the man. This was a trap, and Mitchell knew it all too well, yet he was arrogant, matching Harrison's cold rage with insolence. The odds of numbers lay with Harrison, eight or nine to two. The setting, too, was his; carefully chosen, planned in each minute detail. Yet it was Mitchell and not Harrison who wore the air of authority.

Harrison's voice lashed out. "You're right I'll lay them face up! I ain't askin' you why Bat Tremaine is here; it don't matter. Because neither one of you is goin' out o' here alive!

"Mitchell, I've played along with you for five years now. Except for me you couldn't have marketed the beef you stole. And I've played square with you. I've made some money, sure; but look at the risk I ran. If I had double-crossed you—"

"I'd have killed you, same's you're fixin' to do to me. Well, all I'm askin' is, what do you think you know?"

"Late last night a friend o' mine that works for Etheridge tell me his boss has got a letter tippin' him off about this hideout here. He says his boss made the rounds and all his neighbors got letters just like his. *You wrote them letters, Slick.*"

"Why me?" Mitchell's tone was careless, whimsical. "Lots of men know about this place. Mine do; and you've hired quite a few stray men yourself. Why not one of them?"

Harrison leaned forward a little and his heavy lips pulled back into an evil grin. "I seen that letter, Slick," he said. "And I recognized the handwritin'. I've seen it often enough."

Slick Mitchell nodded thoughtfully. "Now, that was careless of me, sure," he said. "I never should've let you see my writin', Dan." Then, in the same calm casual tone: "I reckon the two behind me in the door are up to you, Tremaine. I'll handle Harrison."

So calmly was the order given that it took Harrison and his men by surprise. Bat had a glimpse of Harrison's slack-lipped face; saw the two men in the door stand motionless, not realizing that the time had come. And Tremaine grinned. *They call him Slick,* he thought. *They named him right!*

Dan Harrison grunted suddenly and his big hands left the table top to strike down for his guns. Bat saw Mitchell's body bend and sway, the hands a blur of speed as Mitchell made his draw.

Bat's own guns leaped up in smooth swift flight. They spoke together, rocking back upon the hinges of his wrists. Across the room he heard the single smashing bark of Mitchell's gun.

THE two men at the door were driven back as Tremaine's lead smashed home. Behind them, other men sprang swiftly out of line to clear a lane outside the door. One of the two inside pitched forward and his revolver clattered across the floor. The other man turned slowly and walked outside, the fingers of his left hand digging at his chest. He passed from sight and Tremaine heard him fall.

Bat shot a sidelong glance across the room. Dan Harrison still sat behind the table but his head was bowed and his big hands pawed uselessly across a spreading stain high up upon his chest. He was not dead; not even badly hurt, Bat thought.

A crooked smile played on Mitchell's lips. "Nice work, Tremaine," he said approvingly. "I put the bulk of it on you, but you came through. If you hadn't—" A gun cracked viciously from somewhere in the yard and a bullet chipped the tabletop an inch from Mitchell's hip. He stepped aside and grinned.

"We've just begun this thing," Bat said. "It's lucky that this shack is made of logs. They can't shoot through the walls. But we're penned in."

"You think so?" Mitchell said. "Why do you think I smashed Dan's shoulder when I might've downed him permanent? We're going out of here, Tremaine. Dan here will be our bodyguard."

A slow smile broke across Bat's face as Mitchell's meaning dawned on him. He knew suddenly that from the very first Slick Mitchell had moved carefully upon a plotted course; that every movement in the play, however casual, was planned. Even amid the shocking thunder of the guns Mitchell's brain had worked unerringly to choose a pathway of escape. *And my job is to outsmart him,* Bat thought.

Mitchell turned swiftly and reached across the table. He caught Harrison's collar; jerked him up. "Come on, Dan—on your feet!" Then he called into the yard: "We're comin' out! Harrison's comin' first, with my gun jammed against his back. What happens then is up to you. If you cut down on us I'll smash Dan's spine before I drop. He'll die damn hard, and take a long time doin' it!"

Harrison's face was distorted with pain and rage, but his voice was strong and clear. "Don't try to hinder him. Let him go. He'd do just what he said."

Slick Mitchell's laughter had an ugly ring. "You're damn tootin' I would! . . . Come on, Tremaine."

They moved slowly through the door and out into the sunlit yard. Six men stood motionless about the place and a seventh lay just outside the door. A man beside the shack spoke gruffly as Tremaine and Mitchell reached their mounts. "What d'you aim t' do with Harrison?"

Mitchell said, "Harrison goes with me, like this, until we're out of rifle-shot. We'll leave him then and you can come for him."

Bat mounted quickly and caught up the reins of Mitchell's horse. It was a slow, nerve-wracking business, that retreat; but it was over finally and Harrison sank down in an exhausted heap.

Mitchell mounted then and spurred in hot pursuit as Bat's big sorrel led the way along a twisting trail among the trees. They came out into the open on a higher bench and Bat looked back. Four men were walking out toward the spot where Harrison still sat and Bat grinned crookedly, imagining their futile rage. But Mitchell's startled oath brought him to the alert again.

"By God! Look there!"

Bat whirled and followed Mitchell's pointing finger with his eyes. Two horsemen sat in silhouette against the sky above the ledge where Bat had slept, and even as he looked they wheeled their mounts and disappeared. "That was Ware and old man Etheridge," Bat said slowly. "What could've brought them here?"

Mitchell winked. "Didn't you hear Harrison ravin' about letters? Them letters was distributed late yesterday, by special messenger."

Bat frowned. "So Harrison was right. You're double-crossin' him. Why?"

The wary hardness faded out of Mitchell's eyes and he laughed again. "Because Dan Harrison was gettin' too damn big," he said. "For five years now Dan's been gougin' me. I've done the work and he's took a big cut out of the profits. And all the time he's been figurin' to squeeze me out; kill me or drive me out and boss my gang himself. That's why he's rounded up that crew of fightin' men. . . . But now I don't need him any more. I've got another buyer for my beef; a man that ain't as big a hog as Harrison. And so I sent those letters."

Bat nodded. "And now that Ware and Etheridge have looked," he said, "you figure they'll blame Harrison?"

"Not exactly," Mitchell said. "Them ranchers know who's stealin' their cows, but they can't get through Lookout Gap to tackle me and this'll make 'em plenty sore at Dan. I figure they'll land on Harrison all spraddled out; and Dan's gun-fightin' crew will keep 'em busy for awhile, sabe?"

He turned aside abruptly into a narrow canyon choked at its mouth with brush. Bat frowned, bewildered, but a way opened ahead of them as the horses crowded in and where the canyon turned the brushy barrier ended and a trail led up along a narrow ledge. Mitchell caught Bat's puzzled look.

"I'm takin' you in the back way," he said. "It's shorter. Most folks think the Sink is a jug with only one spout, but it ain't. A place with just one door might be a trap. . . . What was I sayin'?"

"That Harrison would put up a scrap."

"Yeah. And while they're fightin' we'll be roundin' up cattle; sweepin' 'em in from all across the range. Harrison's stuff along with the rest. By God, I'll get back some of what Dan's gouged out of me!"

THE trail they followed led them up across a sawtooth ridge and back into a country Bat had never seen. It was midmorning when Mitchell halted on the lip of a sheer precipice and turned to grin at Bat. "We're here," he said. "What do you think of it?"

Bat braced both hands upon his saddle horn and leaned forward a little, taking in the scene. A shallow, steep-pitched shelf dropped down before them into a mile-wide gorge walled in with sheer high cliffs.

The floor was rough, wooded heavily in spots, cut here and there with deep ravines. At the eastern end the cliffs were lower and there Bat saw the narrow bottleneck that opened into Lookout Gap. The Gap itself was an oval cup with steep-pitched rocky wall pinched in at east and west to narrow passes, the opening at the east giving out upon the open range, the one at the west providing entrance to the Sink.

And in the center of the Sink there was a town. The size of it surprised Tremaine. There were two dozen shacks at least, and at a central point two larger buildings that Bat guessed were stores. Behind these buildings was a great plank-fenced corral well filled with saddle stock.

It was a breath-taking path that led down into the Sink but Mitchell took it carelessly and Bat's sure-footed sorrel followed him. A man with a rifle stood in a shallow niche a little more than half way down and when they passed he came out and walked after them.

It was a full half-mile from the base of the cliff to the outskirts of the town. Mitchell did not halt until he reached the big saloon and a general store. A group of men lounged on the porch and Mitchell spoke to them and tipped his head toward Tremaine.

"Boys, this is Bat Tremaine. . . . Bat, pick yourself an empty shack and make yourself at home." He turned to the crowd: "You hombres get some sleep this afternoon. We'll be ridin' tonight. Meet me here at eight."

He left them and Bat took his sorrel to the big corral, then joined the group in the saloon.

They accepted him as men had always accepted him, drawn to him by the calm self-confidence that was his strength. And yet he held aloof a little, feeling in his heart a strange unwillingness to know these men. *I'm here to betray 'em,* he thought, *and I hate the job. I'd hate it even worse if I had to go and make friends with them.*

Following the mid-day meal the town went dutifully to sleep. Little groups around saloon and store broke up and men went to their shacks. Doors closed and noises ceased. Outlaws though these men were, they bowed to Mitchell's law, and that fact bred a new respect for the leader in Tremaine's mind.

He too went to his shack and lay down on the bed; but he could not sleep. Over and over again his restless mind measured the task ahead of him and each time the size of it appalled him. "I'm here," he told himself, "and I landed just when things are gettin' ready to pop. But what can I do? This Mitchell's smarter than I ever guessed he'd be. . . . I might go out now and warn Travers, but if I did that, Mitchell'd simply change his plan. Or else he'd hole up in here and let us beat ourselves to death against his men at Lookout Gap. . . . Not even knowin' about that back door would help. He'd put a guard on that and shut it up."

HE DOZED a little finally and was awakened shortly after three o'clock by the staccato beat of running hoofs. He sat up and watched a rider fling down from a lathered horse in front of Mitchell's shack. He grunted, suddenly wide awake. The animal was branded Running W; Ware's brand.

Tremaine walked to the back door of his shack. Slick Mitchell's cabin stood some fifty yards away, toward the big corral; and there was not a soul in sight. Bat stepped out and stood for a moment, yawning, while he weighed the situation in his mind. He was a newcomer here; could not be expected to fall at once into its disciplined routine. And no one could object to his going down to groom his horse.

He stretched lazily and walked openly along a path that ran behind the shacks. Mitchell's cabin was larger than the rest, evidently of two rooms. Even before Bat

reached the rear he heard the rumble of Slick Mitchell's voice: "I know all that," Mitchell said irritably. "I wrote the damn letters and I seen Ware and Etheridge givin' Harrison's place the once-over. So what? Get on with it."

Bat paused beside the cabin open door and glanced inside. The room at the back was empty and the door between stood ajar. On sudden impulse, Tremaine stepped inside. He would be out of sight there in case any of Mitchell's men should look this way; and a single leap would carry him outside again.

Another voice came to him plainly now. "There was quite a gatherin' of men when Ware and Etheridge got back. They met at Bat Tremaine's Bar 6 on account of it bein' sort of central. When Ware told 'em what him and Etheridge had seen that crowd was wild t' tackle Harrison; but Travers held 'em back."

There was a pause; then Mitchell's voice in one curt word: "Why?"

"Is Tremaine here?"

Bat stiffened as the strange voice spoke his name. He heard a chair creak as if a man had leaned forward suddenly. Then Mitchell said, "He's here. What's that got to do with it?"

"Plenty! Travers held that bunch from jumpin' Harrison because he said he'd sent Tremaine in here to spy on you. Seems he hadn't aimed to spread the news, but this business about Harrison sort o' forced his hand. Tremaine's holdin' up the bank was just a fake. Travers sent Tremaine in here so that Bat could get friendly with you and lead you into a trap. And he didn't want that bunch to jump Harrison until he heard from Bat. Said it might upset Bat's plans."

There was a crash as of a fist brought down upon a tabletop. Then Mitchell's voice again: "His plans are damn sure upset now, by God! And me thinkin' I'd found me a man that I could trust!"

The other voice broke in again. "First thing you better do is change any plans that young Tremaine has heard about."

"He don't know anything that can matter much," Mitchell said. "And if he did it wouldn't do him any good. . . . You better beat it now before you're missed. You'll get an extra cut for this; remind me of it when we pay off next time. . . . Are them jaspers still at the Bar 6?"

"They're waitin' there. Travers figures he'd better keep 'em bunched. They figure somethin's due to break and Tremaine will want to get in touch with them."

Mitchell's low laughter had an ugly sound. "Havin' all them fellers bunched will suit me fine. I aimed to raid Harrison's T Slash tonight, figurin' he'd be busy movin' them cattle out of the valley. Instead of that, I'll pull a general raid."

Bat heard the visitor stand up and move toward the outer door. He turned stealthily and stepped outside. He waited by the door until he heard the pound of hoofs that told him Mitchell's guest had gone, then moved swiftly down toward the horse corral. He looked back once, giving way to the crawling fear that made the skin across his back feel tight and cold. If Mitchell saw him and guessed what he had overheard a slug would smash into his spine; and he remembered the threat Mitchell had made to Harrison: "You'll die damn hard and take a long time doin' it!"

The sorrel came to him willingly and Tremaine lifted his saddle from the fence and swung it into place.

A deep ravine led up behind the store and Bat walked the sorrel into it, ears strained to catch the first sounds of pursuit. He came up among a belt of trees upon a higher ledge; began the dangerous climb along the trail that led up to the rim. Halfway up he looked toward the shacks and saw Slick Mitchell walking down toward the general store and Bat's throat tightened. He'd make an easy target pinned here against the sheer blank wall. But Mitchell's head was bowed and he passed from sight without once looking up.

IT WAS after five o'clock when Tremaine came down through the brushy barrier that masked the back door to the Sink.

"If we work fast tonight we can bottle Mitchell up in there," he muttered thoughtfully. "Always before when we tried that he could sneak out and pull a raid behind our back. Now that we know how he got out we can block that. By plugging up both ends, we can starve him out. It'll take time, but it'll work. . . .

It was this deep absorption that nearly wrecked his plans before they were completely made. The sorrel's hoofbeats ceased abruptly as he crossed a patch of sandy ground and not till then did Tremaine hear the pursuing hoofs.

He shot a startled glance toward the rear. An angle in the canyon stopped his view but the swift roll of hoofs was very near and Bat spurred forward desperately in headlong flight. The canyon opened just ahead into rolling, open range. The sorrel cleared the opening and Bat wheeled him to the left behind a jutting point of rock, uncertain at the last if he had made the turn unseen.

A horde of riders thundered past him suddenly and halted just outside the canyon mouth. A blaring voice had called that halt and Tremaine frowned in quick bewilderment. The voice was Harrison's.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bat Closes In

SO THEY weren't chasin' me at all, Tremaine thought swiftly. Peering carefully around a corner of the rock he caught a glimpse of Harrison, gigantic on his creamy mare, his left arm carried in a sling. Harrison spoke again.

"Here's where we split. Four of you come with me. We'll ride out a piece and come in towards Lookout on the trail. The rest of you keep in against the hills. Get in as close to the Gap as you can without bein' seen, sabe? There's cover there. Get set and wait for me."

Harrison paused and a second voice cut in. "If you're figurin' to bust in through the Gap you're crazy, Dan. Slick will have warned his boys to keep us out, and a man or two in Lookout Gap could hold an army out o' there."

"Who asked you what you thought?" Harrison spat the words as if they burned his tongue. But he must have sensed the weight of opinion against him for his tone was less insulting when he spoke again.

"Look here. Suppose things was reversed; suppose you was holdin' Lookout Gap and I'd given orders not to let Mitchell through. What would you do? You'd stop em, sure—but you wouldn't shoot 'em down on sight. And them guards up there now will talk before they shoot, the same as you would do. I ride up; they stop me; I talk to 'em. When they show themselves, you jaspers cut 'em down."

Another speaker answered him. "That part may work, but what comes next? We'll still be goin' up against long odds."

"There's ways of squarin' up long odds," Harrison said coldly. "Brains is one. Suppose we take the Gap; what's to hinder us from scatterin' around that little cup inside and waitin' there till Mitchell tries to ride outside? And when he does that, what's to hinder us from tearin' him apart? We'd have him surrounded, him in the open and us well hid, with both gates to the Gap plugged up. . . . and after *that* what's to hinder us from movin' in the Sink in Mitchell's place? We're through, the way things are. That way, we'd be safe."

Aman among the crowd spat out an oath. "I'm for it, Dan! Them two boys him and Bat Tremaine shot down this mornin' was my friends. I'm speakin' for Tremaine, that's all!"

"Get goin' then!" Harrison snapped.

They passed within a score of yards of

Tremaine's hiding place and he sat motionless, his pulses hammering, his hands upon his holstered guns. But no one saw him and he rode out carefully.

Within a mile he came abreast of Lookout Gap and he dismounted and climbed up to a ridge from which the Gap was visible. He had not long to wait. The sun had long since dropped behind the hills but even in the dusk he recognized Dan Harrison's cream-colored mare as Harrison and his four men rode in toward the Gap. Again he heard Dan Harrison's harsh voice: "Hi, boys. How's chances to come in?"

High up upon a ledge a man stood up to answer him. A second figure showed beside the first. Bat heard the answer to Harrison's hail: "Sorry, Dan. You can't come through."

"The hell! Well, if we can't, we can't. Tell Slick—"

A slapping volley lashed up from the rocks before the Gap and Tremaine saw the figures on the ledge smashed back before a leaden hail. The thing was sudden; sickening. Tremaine's hands clenched spasmodically and his palms were coldly moist. He swore beneath his breath.

It worked! he thought. *Dan's smarter than I thought. The question is, what does this do to me?*

He watched the T Slash men file through the Gap; saw two of them climb up to the niche where Mitchell's guard had met their death. He slid back down beside his horse at last and made a cigarette, pulling the hot smoke deep into his lungs. "I've got to figure this thing right," he mumbled. "If Harrison makes good his plan we're simply swappin' gangs. And of the two I reckon Harrison's is worse!"

He found a pencil in his pocket and ripped a blank page from his tally-book. He spread the paper on his saddle while he wrote.

To Buck Travers:
Harrison just captured Lookout Gap and laid a trap for Mitchell there. Mitchell aims to ride out on a raid tonight, so he'll walk right into it. If you come a-running we can trap them both. I'll meet you on the trail to Lookout Gap.

Bat Tremaine

He tied the note upon his saddle horn and tied the reins up tightly so the sorrel could not graze. So tied, he would go home. Bat pulled his rifle from its sheath beneath the saddle skirt; then paused to add a final warning to his note:

You doggone fool, you talk too much! Your publishing the news about why I was joining Mitchell's outfit like to got me killed. Mitchell's got spies in Ware's outfit and likely elsewhere too. Remember that. And bring Red back to me.

He turned the sorrel's head toward the west; brought his hand down hard across the horse's rump.

He climbed back to his lookout point upon the ridge and settled down to wait. The moon came up behind him and its radiance lad a silvery sheen upon the stark rock cliffs of Lookout Gap, subduing its lines and lending beauty to the scene.

IT WAS just past seven o'clock when Tremaine heard the muffled thud of hoofs approaching from the east. He slid down from his perch and found the trail. A mass of horsemen halted just short of the ridge and Travers spoke in muted tones as Bat came down to them. "That you, Tremaine?"

"Hi, Buck. You're just in time."

"That's good." Travers leaned down to hand Tremaine the reins to Bat's red horse. Their hands touched in the darkness and Travers' fingers closed upon Tremaine's in a quick hard grip. "It's good to see you, fellah," he muttered. "I been worried some. Suppose you tell us what to do."

Tremaine swung up into the saddle, feeling the tension of the men as they closed in about him. Yesterday, some of these men had hunted him. Today, they looked to him for leadership.

In clipped, terse sentences he told them what he knew. "And so it's Harrison that holds the Gap right now, sabe? My idea is, let Mitchell walk into the trap. Buck and me will circle back through Mitchell's back door and when he rides down into the Gap, we'll come in back of him and cut off his retreat. The Gap is bottle-necked at that end too, and there's lots of cover there. Two men can hold it easily. Meanwhile, the rest of you will close in on this end. Wait till the shootin' starts. That'll be Harrison cuttin' down on Mitchell's bunch. Then you boys block this end and we'll have Harrison and Mitchell both. Harrison's got a couple of guards up on the cliff, but I reckon when the fight begins they'll be payin' more attention to it than to you. I figure you can catch 'em nappin' and go on through."

Stephen Ware nodded. "Sounds reasonable," he said. "Only why not take more men inside the Sink?"

"The fewer of us goes," Bat said, "the better chance we'll have of gettin' there unseen. Don't worry. Buck and I can handle it."

He paused, listening. A breath of sound came down to him from Lookout Gap; the sound of many hoofs on rocky soil. A single shot cracked startlingly across the night and following that a strident yell. Another shot, and then a crackling volley that sent echoes slapping crazily among the peaks.

Buck Travers' angry voice cut through the clamor of the guns. "We're too damn late!"

TREMAINE spurred out until he could see beyond the intervening ridge. He knew beyond a doubt what had occurred. "Slick's made an earlier start," he whispered. "When he said eight o'clock he was figurin' just on raidin' Harrison. A general raid would take more time. I should've figured that. Now Harrison will wipe him out and take his place."

He leaned forward suddenly, watching two black shapes slide back along the moonlit wall of Lookout Gap. That would be Harrison's sentries moving back along their ledge to share the fight. That movement bred a sudden hope in Tremaine's mind.

"I'm goin' through!" he snapped. "If we let Harrison lick Mitchell and get forted up inside the Gap, he'll be as hard to get as Mitchell's been. If I can get through now, I can plug up the other end."

He touched the sorrel with the spurs; heard Travers shout, "I'm comin' too!" and grinned. They topped the crest a yard apart, Buck's gelding fighting hard to match the sorrel's stride. A hundred yards of benchland lay between them and the Gap and they crossed it at headlong speed, like scudding shadows on the moonlit flat. The mouth of Lookout yawned ahead of them and Tremaine heard a startled yell from high up on the cliff.

A tongue of flame slashed down toward him and he heard the whine of lead. He whipped one gun aloft, stabbing an answering shot toward the ledge; then leaned across the saddle horn and let the red colt run. He glanced back once; saw Travers close behind him and heard the throaty bark of Travers' gun. An instant later they were past the bottleneck, and safe inside the Gap.

Bat sat erect and swept the scene with swift appraising eyes. A tangled, fighting mass of men and horses made a splotch of black against the bottom of the cup ahead. That would be Mitchell's men, Bat knew. He saw the mass disintegrate; saw horses wheel and plunge away in startled flight; saw men running desperately to scanty cover in the rougher ground beside the trail. And from the hills he saw the leaping tongues of fire that formed a fringe of dancing flame where Harrison's encircling marksmen poured their lead into the riddled target underneath.

He veered his horse to the left, con-

scious now of a sickish sympathy for Mitchell's plight. *He's bad, but he's a man,* he thought. *A man with guts!*

Then, high above the tumult of the guns and drumming hoofs, Bat heard Dan Harrison's hoarse roar of rage. *"Tremaine's comin'! Don't let him through!"* He was conscious after that that the guns upon the hillside to his left had switched their target now to concentrate on Travers and himself.

A bullet smashed with sledging force against Bat's hip and the shock of impact flung the sorrel off his stride. The red colt stumbled heavily; went to his knees. Bat saw Buck Travers flash ahead, rein back and turn; yelled hoarsely, "Buck! Go on!"

The sorrel lunged up gallantly, found footing once again and surged ahead. Bat's whole left side felt numb. He saw Buck Travers swing toward the right again, down to the trail. It seemed impossible that they were through the Gap, yet suddenly they rode between close towering walls; were in the inner bottleneck that gave into the Sink. Bat reined the sorrel to a halt and vaulted down.

He stumbled heavily and Travers caught him in his arms. His left leg felt entirely dead. He felt along his hip and side, expecting blood; found none. His fingers touched his holstered gun and suddenly he understood. He laughed and Travers stared at him. "You all right, Bat?"

"Hell, yes! The luckiest man in the world, that's me! A rifle bullet hit my gun, that's all; smashed the butt-plates all to hell and near knocked me off my horse, but never broke the hide! . . . Get cover, Buck, as high up as you can. I'll hole up here."

THE firing in the Gap had dwindled now to intermittent bursts. Mitchell's men, those that were left, had found what cover was available and had settled down to stubborn hopeless siege.

Tremaine sat down among the rocks that partly blocked the inner gate. His leg ached dully and he knew that it was badly bruised. The slug had smashed his gun against his hip with paralyzing force. He drew the weapon from its sheath and held it where the moonlight struck upon the shattered grips; bent forward suddenly and stared into the cavity formed by the hollow frame inside the butt.

A tightly folded wad of paper, firmly wedged so that it did not interfere with the heavy leaf-spring there, came out beneath his probing finger and he stared at it with vague surprise. He sheathed the gun again and spread the paper flat. The moonlight fell upon a written page and Bat bent over it, a sudden vacant feeling underneath his ribs as he identified the neat firm script.

Dear Son:

The first two words set Tremaine's heart to hammering. He moistened dry lips with his tongue and read on:

> I reckon I'm just seeing things and you'll likely never read this at all. But Harrison's being late the way he was, and his paying me in cash, looks sort of queer. I'm writing this just in case anything should happen. I aim to put it inside the butt-plates of my gun. Nobody's apt to find it there; but if I was to get knocked off *you'd* find it pretty soon because I've ordered some new pearl plates to pretty up my guns and in putting those plates on you'd sure find this.

Bat paused, remembering. A gunsmith in San Andres had given him a set of new pearl plates soon after Jim Tremaine was killed, saying that Tremaine had paid for them. But Bat had never put them on the guns. *I wanted to keep the Colts the way dad used 'em,* he thought. *If I'd put 'em on the way he planned I would have found this years ago.*

> No matter what happens, I've fixed it so you'll get the money Harrison paid me. What I'm worrying about is that somebody aims to lift the money off me tonight; maybe Harrison himself. So when young Tom Hurley

was in to notarize the deed I kept him after the others left and turned the money over to him. He's working for the bank so I took his receipt the same as a deposit slip, telling him to deposit it to my account. I'm putting the receipt with this and all you got to do is present it to the bank.

Bat, I know you hated having me sell the old T Slash and I'm wondering now if I done the right thing. I thought a lot of the spread, same as you did; but I cared more for you. And I sure didn't want you turning into a damn gunman. If you was older and sort of settled you'd make a good cattleman. Maybe later on you and me can own another spread together, eh?

Your loving dad,
J. T. Tremaine

Bat gulped and rubbed his hand across his eyes. The clatter of the guns went on unheard about him for a time and hot tears blinded him. Even after the first surge of his emotion passed, his mind groped back to fit together bits of hitherto unrelated facts.

"This is what he was tryin' to tell me when he died," he whispered brokenly. "Hurley was just a strugglin' clerk then, but it was less than a year later that he claimed an uncle died somewhere and left him quite a stack of cash. That's when he started in to get control of the bank. Then Hurley hid the cash and waited to see if his receipt would come to light. I reckon he had some alibi worked out to explain why he hadn't deposited it in case his havin' it got known. But when it didn't Tom decided he was safe."

TREMAINE laughed softly as a new thought came to him. "Looks like I've sort of got you, Tom!" he muttered. "I've got the evidence to prove you stole dad's money, and I've got enough of *your* money, hid under Doc Tamerlin's bed, to pay the debt with interest! I reckon you won't refuse to settle!"

He glanced at the receipt that held Tom Hurley's signature; folded it together with the letter and tucked them both into a pocket of his shirt. He glanced up then toward the battle going on below. A man sprang out beyond a clump of rocks down there and made a zig-zag dash toward Tremaine. Guns on the slope spat out a quick excited burst and the runner dropped behind a log.

A moment passed, then he came on again and suddenly Bat saw the runner's aim. A shallow ditch ran just beside the trail a little to the west and if the fugitive could win that cover he might reach the opening in which Tremaine and Travers lay. He stumbled once and almost fell; came up again and dived headlong into the ditch. And in the silence following the stuttered clatter of the guns Bat heard the runner laugh.

The man lay still awhile to catch his breath. He came up then and came along the ditch on hands and knees, his sixgun glistening against the sand ahead of him. Tremaine moved forward cautiously and stopped behind a rock the man must pass. The figure straightened and for the first time Bat glimpsed his face.

"I've got you covered, Slick," he said. "Stand where you are."

"Tremaine?" Mitchell's voice was sharp, breathless. "I figured you was comin' here. And I know why. I ain't blamin' you for what you did; for comin' in to spy on me. It took guts to do that and that's a thing I sure admire. You're a man, Tremaine. That's why I came to you instead of waitin' for Dan Harrison to pick us off."

"What's on your mind?"

"I gave you a break this morning, Tremaine. You asleep, and me thinkin' you had the money from the bank, I might've put a bullet into you. I'd have been disappointed about the cash, but that wouldn't have helped you. That right?"

"That's right," Tremaine agreed.

"Now I'm askin' you to do as much for me. You've wrecked my gang; that part is done. You've got no grudge against me, I reckon, man to man. Now you've got the drop, but my gun's out and I'm too fast for you to take unnecessary chances with. I'm askin' you to let me go. And if you

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don't, I aim to make you kill me, Bat. You've got the choice."

The sheer bravado of the threat had charm. It was so like the man—reckless, yet quick to see the one lone chance and quick to stake the limit on that chance against all odds. Bat thought, *He's so smart he knows I'm feelin' mean for double-crossin' him.*

He said, "What would you do if I did let you go?"

And Mitchell shrugged. "I'm not beggin', Bat. I ain't promisin' to go to Sunday school. But I will promise this: you'll never hear of me again. I'll be long gone. I own a spread down in Old Mex. I've always thought I'd settle there someday. I reckon this would be the time."

Tremaine said, "Buck, what do you say?"

And Travers answer came: "Hell, Bat, it's up to you. I'm deaf and blind."

Bat grinned suddenly, feeling a heavy weight removed. "Get goin', Slick," he said.

Slick Mitchell sheathed his gun and turned, his hand outstretched. "You're white, Tremaine. I'm thankin' you."

A rifle shot cracked sharply from behind Tremaine and Mitchell staggered back, his right hand clutching at his chest. Bat whirled, hands streaking down to holstered guns. He glimpsed a wisp of smoke high up upon the cliff; saw Harrison's distorted face above the blank unwinking muzzle of a gun.

HIS own guns thundered then and acrid smoke rolled back across his wrists. He chopped the weapons down again, rolling the hammers underneath his thumbs. He heard Buck Travers yell; saw Harrison lurch up and sway against the moonlit wall. His hands worked automatically, playing the heavy Colts with rhythmic speed. Dan Harrison's big body shook before the smashing impact of the slugs. He toppled slowly forward and crashed down. Bat turned in time to see Slick Mitchell fall.

He knelt and saw the outlaw smile.

"He's paid for it," Bat said, his voice a little hoarse. "He's dead."

Slick Mitchell met Bat's gaze. "I'll pay you back for what you tried to do for me," he said. "I'll—end your search for your dad's murderer. . . . He's—over there; Dan Harrison. He paid in cash so he could get it back. He swore he never found the money, though. I—never knew if he was lyin' about that or not. But anyway—he did the job. I seen him—comin' down—the ladder—afterward. . . ." Slick Mitchell shuddered violently and then was still.

Tremaine looked up. Buck Travers stood beside him and he nodded as he met Bat's gaze. "I heard," he said.

The rest took little time. With both their leaders dead, the T Slash men and the remnant of Slick Mitchell's gang lost interest in their fight and called a truce; and it was not until the combined forces stood together in the center of the Gap that Travers let them know they were trapped.

It was an easy victory. The possemen under Stephen Ware closed in upon them from the east and Travers and Tremaine came down to meet them from the west. Ware met Tremaine with outstretched hand.

"You've done a damn fine job, Tremaine," he said. "You've earned rewards enough to do the things you had to do and more."

Bat nodded, thinking of the money under Doctor Tamerlin's bed. *I've done my job,* he thought. *I've squared my debt to dad and now I'm fixed to square my other debts as well. I'll buy the T Slash back, and after that—*

Ware's friendly voice cut in to fit concisely with his thoughts. "If I was you," Ware said, "I'd fork that sorrel colt and go tell Sally how things stand. She'd like to know."

And Tremaine grinned. "I reckon that's a good idea," he said. ● ● ●

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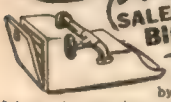

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(Continued from page 44)

canyon wall; slipping and pitching him down. The butt struck something that jarred his whole body and clapped his teeth together with a loud clack. He lay again spreadeagled, but secure.

A rider had wheeled and was racing his horse back down the canyon. Soon he was lost to sight.

The other two lay where they had fallen. Crumpled up on the canyon floor, their horses standing there, waiting.

Pete looked across the canyon and saw Jeanne stand up from behind a rock. Her white shift glinted in the falling sun. Too, he could see the white chicken bone still stuck valiantly in the piled-up mound of her hair.

LYDE was conscious when Pete arrived. They watched the two dust banners from the far side of the mesa retreat before the crashing of Joe Wilson's gun. They merged with the one that had retreated, and went racing out the canyon from which they had entered.

The two dead men were Cree Kanet and Sam Brast.

The chief strength of the bunch.

"If I thought—I had—killed a man—" Jeanne cried.

Pete said, "You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. You darned near killed me with Lyde's gun. Your shots were bustin' rocks all around me."

"Do you think so? I scared them, I know that, but do you think—"

He laughed. "You didn't come within a mile." He said it very strongly, because he knew it was a lie. He was a good enough rifle shot to know who he was shooting at, and he hadn't aimed for Sam Brast.

Now he saw that Jeanne believed she had not really killed Sam Brast, and she was content.

He went down into the canyon to catch the horses. ● ● ●

(Continued from page 72)

stake and runs home, that is a good joke on our enemies."

"And if I'd got halfway to Benton and lost my horse—if I'd missed the steamboat—" Haynes stopped, seeing fully now the unexpected subtlety of Standing Horse.

"Here is the rope," Gray Wing said thrusting it soberly at him. "You better hurry."

"No," Haynes said in English. "Damned if I will." Then he repeated it in Crow. "Of a sudden, I don't want to, Gray Wing."

Gray Wing gave no sign of emotion. She nodded, turned, went into the cabin. She emerged holding an envelope and the whiskey bottle.

"My brother was here. He left these."

Haynes took the bottle first. It had not been touched. So Standing Horse had won his own struggle, Haynes thought. He tossed the bottle absently through the cabin door to the buffalo skin that served for a bed. He took the envelope and turned it in his hands. It was addressed to him in Belle's handwriting. Standing Horse had brought it from Benton, Haynes guessed. The letter must have come north by last winter's express. He tore it open.

My dear Jim, the letter began. *Please don't be shocked or hurt. During the long months that I have waited for you, another man . . .*

Haynes didn't finish it. He folded it carefully for a later reading and put it into the patched pocket of his buckskins, the pocket Gray Wing had mended so carefully.

"Gray Wing," he said. "Would you like to go to Benton?"

She smiled and nodded. "If you go."

"And if I stay? If I wait for the trader to come here for my furs?"

"I like it here," Gray Wing said.

"So do I," Haynes said, and he leaned forward to kiss her, suddenly light-hearted. "After all, there's nothing in Benton worth the trip." ● ● ●

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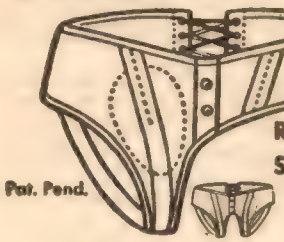

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(Continued from page 87)

and hid the boy in her arms like an old hen over her last chick.

He's seen it, Mingo thought. *He's seen a man can be a man, no matter how big the world gets around him. And none of them will ever make him forget.*

People were beginning to run very fast up and down the street—as they were running, running, running through the dark cold streets of the world. Mingo wanted to call past the crowd of flickering legs to the boy—something about not giving a damn for the others as long as you did what you had to—but he could only whisper a few words into the dust before the life left him.

* * *

Wickson, who was the second man to reach him, turned the sheriff's body over with his booted toe and glared angrily down at it. There was a smudge of dirt over one corner of its mouth.

"What was he saying?" he asked. "I saw him say something."

"He said he didn't give a damn," somebody murmured.

A hot wave of exasperation made Wickson tighten his fists. "Might have known it!" he snapped. "The old fool!" He turned away quickly, because he was afraid he might kick the body right there in the street. But the way the crowd broke away from him made him stop and look back.

The two farmers who had been with young Dean were bending over the body, but the rest were looking up the street at him. There was an impersonal expression in their faces, as if they were all examining someone they had never seen before.

The thought hit him: *why, they think he was right.*

Something a little like fear trickled into his mind, but he shut it off and turned toward the store. People never seemed to know what was the best for them. ● ● ●

THE STRAWBOSS

(Continued from page 6)

The bloody hand became a symbol that was then adopted by young braves who were setting out on "do or die" missions, and was placed on the animal's shoulder. If the horse succeeded in carrying him safely through his mission, the sign was removed from the shoulder to the hip, in the position where the Indian would have patted the animal to reward him for his faithfulness. It was then called the "pat hand," and was often painted onto the warrior's horse at the end of a mission as a kind of honor bestowed by the Chief himself.

However during the Indian Wars, the bloody hand took on a new and terrible meaning. Despite the tear-jerking dramatics of the famous bar-room picture called "Custer's Last Stand," it is now pretty well recognized by historians that Custer was a hot-headed, ambitious general who, knowing nothing of Indian warfare, went west to carve himself a quick reputation and advancement at the expense of broken promises and doublecrossing of the Indians.

The Indians knew and respected General Carrington, but they quickly realized, as did Custer's own soldiers, that Custer was out to make a name for himself over the dead bodies of the Indians.

And so the Indians, after suffering a few

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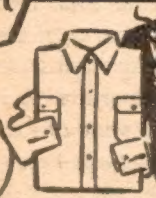
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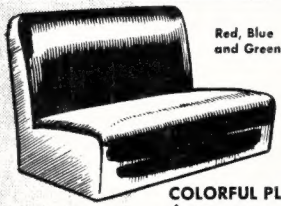

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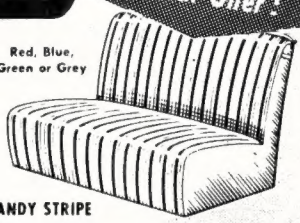

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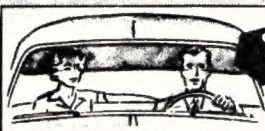

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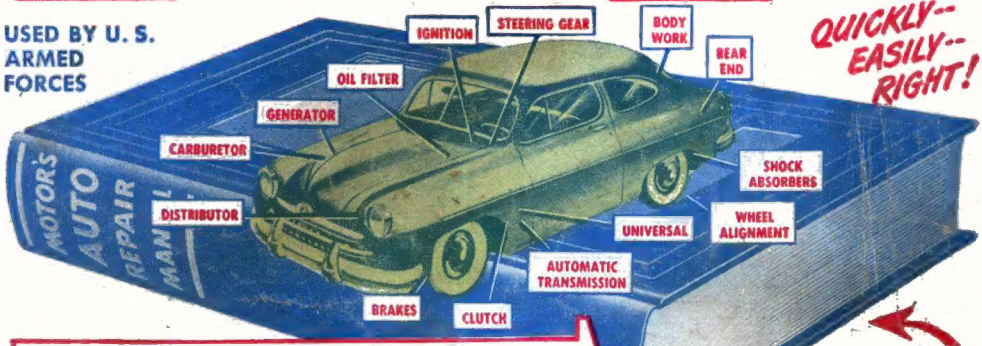

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